

UNTYING THE KNOT

On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes

Edited by

Galit Hasan-Rokem

and

David Shulman

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IN MEMORIAM

Elli Kōngäs-Maranda

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A. K. Ramanujan

Amitai Rokem

Lea Shamgar-Handelman

ἐπόμεροι. τί δέ τις,
τί δ'οὔ τις.

Pindar, Pythia 8.95

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CONTENTS

Contributors	ix
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I General and Theoretical

1	Introduction	3
	<i>Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman</i>	
2	Riddles and Their Use	10
	<i>Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj</i>	
3	Traps of Trans-formation: Theoretical Convergences between Riddle and Ritual	37
	<i>Don Handelman</i>	
4	“I’ll Give You Three Guesses”: The Dynamics of Genre in the Riddle Tale	62
	<i>Richard Bauman</i>	

II Hebrew Riddles

5	Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle	81
	<i>Dan Pagis</i>	
6	“Spinning Threads of Sand”: Riddles as Images of Loss in the Midrash on Lamentations	109
	<i>Galit Hasan-Rokem</i>	
7	A King, a Queen, and the Riddle Between: Riddles and Interpretation in a Late Midrashic Text	125
	<i>Dina Stein</i>	

III Enigmatic Modes in India

8	The Yakṣa’s Questions	151
	<i>David Shulman</i>	
9	When Is a Riddle Not a Riddle? Some Comments on Riddling and Related Poetic Devices in Classical Sanskrit	168
	<i>Richard Salomon</i>	
10	Why an Allama Poem Is Not a Riddle: An Anthological Essay	179
	<i>A. K. Ramanujan</i>	

11	Texture and Authority: Telugu Riddles and Enigmas <i>Velcheru Narayana Rao</i>	191
12	Enigmas of Sexual Masquerade in Hindu Myths and Tales <i>Wendy Doniger</i>	208
IV Chinese Riddling		
13	Riddle and Enigma in Chinese Civilization <i>Andrew H. Plaks</i>	227
14	Riddles in <i>The Dream of the Red Chamber</i> <i>Irene Eber</i>	237
V Notes from the West		
15	One Voice and Many Legs: Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx <i>Freddie Rokem</i>	255
16	Myth as Enigma: Cultural Hermeneutics in Late Antiquity <i>Guy G. Stroumsa</i>	271
17	Squaring the Circle <i>Ilan Amit</i>	284
18	Connecting through Riddles, or The Riddle of Connecting <i>Shlomith Cohen</i>	294
	Afterword <i>Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman</i>	316
	Author Index	321
	Subject Index	325

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I

GENERAL AND THEORETICAL

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1

Introduction

GALIT HASAN-ROKEM and DAVID SHULMAN

The Gonds of central India perform a ritual when a member of their tribe is dying: at night, the adult men divide into two groups and gather at the boundary of the village; one group chants riddles to the beat of a drum, and the other group searches for the answers. No riddle can go unanswered, and each answer has to reproduce a text sanctified by tradition. In between the riddle exchanges, strange meaningless sounds are also uttered, heavy with sorrow. Women and children are not allowed within earshot of these singing men. The ritual continues until dawn.¹

Why sing riddles at the moment of dying? The transition between realms seems to be articulated by this form. The riddle is poised on the boundary between domains, at the edge of life and death, where each issues into the other. Both are somehow contained and made present through the challenge posed by the riddling question and addressed by its solution.

The riddle's form is dialogic, requiring the interaction of self and other. Two levels are joined in the question, only to be disentangled in the answer. The process involved is inherently enigmatic and also transformative: the transition effected leaves reality changed, restructured, its basic categories restated, recognized, affirmed. This is no less true for the inner reality of consciousness than for any external, "objectified" world.

In short, the riddle, both in itself and in its contextual embeddedness, is rich in existential content. We began with this sense of the riddle's existential expressivity and its implications for more general issues in our understanding of language and narrative. Each of the chapters in this volume derives from this point of departure. Together, they reflect the work of an interdisciplinary group composed mostly of Indologists, folklorists, anthropologists, and literary scholars that convened in Jerusalem at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University during the academic year 1988–1989. We will not attempt to convey here the playful atmosphere of shared excitement that characterized our discussions—although something of this may, we hope, inhere in the essays published in this volume. At this point, let us simply state where we feel we have gone beyond earlier studies of riddle-like genres, and what questions guided us throughout.

A vast secondary literature on riddles and riddling exists;² we have studied much of this material, to our profit, but on the whole our emphases were somewhat different. Existing discussions of the riddle tend to cluster around three approaches: (1) unraveling the logical structure of this form,³ (2) describing the linguistic strategies at work in riddling,⁴ and (3) situating the riddle structurally in relation to neighboring genres.⁵ While these approaches, especially the last one, remained of interest to our group—we devoted much attention to categorical boundaries between riddle and enigma, between literary and folk riddles, and between riddles and closely allied forms such as the puzzle, the oracular prophecy, the proverb, and the dream—our most sustained analyses centered on the systemic, axiological, and existential aspects of the riddle within specific cultural matrices. We sought to understand what constituted the peculiar expressive power of this genre, on the one hand, and the cultural logic of its particular uses, on the other. Why was the riddle so central in certain cultures (such as Vedic India), or in certain contexts? How did it relate to the underlying conceptual structures of a culture, to its internalized cosmology, to its cognitive map or maps of the world? Why do human beings need to fix such forms, and to embed them in highly motivated ritual contexts?

Part of the answer to this set of questions clearly has to do with the categorical (or metacategorical) side of riddling. Defining categories through a process of connecting or superimposing domains, the riddle deals indirectly with the necessarily uneven fit between any cultural universe and its encompassing realities. The riddle can reveal in a brief flash an excluded cosmos, a non-world or topsy-turvy world lurking just beneath or within our properly ordered and familiar one. One might even get lost inside this riddle world: Homer is said to have died because he failed to solve a riddle (although Kalidasa, by way of contrast, is said to have died because he found a solution).⁶ In the Finnish riddling context, failure can lead to exile to the unsettling and inverted world of Hymylä.⁷ The riddle provides possibilities both for dangerous openings and for reassuring closures: in general, as A. K. Ramanujan has insisted, the process moves from an initial mixing of domains to a powerful disambiguation that reclarifies the cultural categories. This epistemological aspect inherent in the genre is studied in several of the chapters (Amit, Hasan-Rokem, Shulman), which seek to define more strictly the nature of the knowledge activated or embodied in riddling, and its implications for the inner process that the “riddlee” undergoes.

But this process is rarely exhausted by epistemological transformation alone. Usually, much deeper and more farreaching developments are intimated, on levels affected by ontological and psychological concerns. Riddling is almost never a “merely” cognitive matter: if it were, both the ritual and literary/narrative uses for the riddle would be far more restricted in scope, and less moving for participants and outside observers (for example, listeners or readers) as well. We might point, for example, to the common feeling of deflation and disappointment that emerges with the solution to a riddle:

What has golden hair and stands in the corner?

The mind plays with fairytale possibilities—a disguised and oppressed princess, in an impoverished home? When we discover, with more or less equal delight and dismay, that our princess is a broom, we may be left to wonder: Is anything left over

from the initial movement of enchantment? Or are brooms truly, in some sense, princesses? What does it mean to domesticate the fantasy in this way? This is the ontological quandary that riddling habitually engenders: Does the riddle, by conflating domains, actually create a new reality? Does the fusing of levels imply a cultural vision of the world as including, within a single system, multiple related, if unseen, worlds? If so, why the constant drive to disentangle these domains, to disambiguate and redefine? Is the moment of solution and closure the potential starting point for more open-ended genres, such as the enigma or the dream?

The knowledge generated by the riddle process has both ontic and emotional components. The riddle is not just a statement about the world; it also produces change within the world. This change may have much to do with the composition of the riddlee's self in relation to the challenge—categorical, social, and/or metaphysical—with which he is presented. Not only do brooms become princesses, and then revert to being brooms, but the self that confronts this process is also forced to view itself from the vantage point of an interacting other (see the chapter by Shlomith Cohen). Categorical displacement or conflation always produces inner movement, with elements of doubt and, often, a drive toward self-delusion and the desperate restoration of the recognized order. This, too, is part of the disappointment mentioned earlier. The classic example is Oedipus, studied in Freddie Rokem's suggestive chapter: the supposedly redemptive answer to the Sphinx actually describes Oedipus himself, and his fate—simultaneously child and husband, father and brother, a single yet multiple existence tragically conflated and condensed.⁸ But Oedipus cannot perceive this truth and, having answered correctly on one level, must then live through the consequences of his answer on another, penetrating the riddle-message with his own body as he discovers the ironic inadequacy of his "solution." Riddling, even as it works on the socially and culturally constituted world, models the self in self-definition; again we approach the existential content of this genre and its frequent situation on the boundary between life and death.

Similarly with language: the riddle toys with the normal borders of referential speech, perhaps demonstrating their hollowness or arbitrary nature; here the conflation of domains points to the magical power of transmutation that is always present within language, and to the habitual limitation and constriction imposed on this power. Thought, embedded in language, protests its confinement precisely through playful forms such as the riddle; aggression, as we know from many riddle tales, is built into the genre and its context of challenge, and death awaits the fool who cannot answer (or, sometimes in India, who can). Again, we observe a double movement—first toward breaching the normative limits of language by transcending or mixing linguistic categories; then toward redelineating a cognitive order at the edge of silence or the absurd. Nowhere else are the intricate relations between speech and silence so dependably in evidence—or so self-consciously and playfully elaborated—as in the riddle and its related enigmatic modes; riddle-tales often map these relations in detail (see the chapters by Bauman and Shulman).

Take an example, one of many that can serve to suggest something of the approach we have adopted, and its rationale. A Libyan-Jewish tale, also attested in a variant from the Tulu-speaking region of South India,⁹ tells of a prince whose task is to make a princess speak three times in the face of her father's command to be silent,

and after his two elder brothers have already failed in this mission. Guided by a conversation he overhears between two birds, he produces three very similar riddle-tales out of three inanimate objects in the girl's room. First, the bed is made to tell a story. Three men cooperate in making a woman come to life: a carpenter carves her image out of wood; a tailor clothes it; and a magician brings it to life. To whom (asks the bed) does the living woman belong? The prince thinks the right answer is: the magician. But the princess indignantly denies this, breaking her silence for the first time: it is the tailor, who made her beautiful, who should win her for himself.

The father then removes the talking bed from the princess's room.

On the next day, the prince asks that a chair tell a story. This time there are two brothers: a wealthy one who has a daughter and a poor one with three sons, all of whom love the girl. Seeking proper professions in the world for her sake, one becomes a doctor, the second a soothsayer, and the third a broad jumper. One day the girl becomes deathly ill. The soothsayer divines her illness from afar; the broad jumper puts his brothers on his shoulders and leaps over the vast distance separating them from her, and the doctor heals her. To whom should she belong (asks the chair)? The princess cannot help responding: the doctor.

The father removes the chair.

On the third day, the prince asks the crown on her head to tell a story. It speaks of a demon who fell in love with a princess, kidnapped her, and imprisoned her in his palace beneath the sea. There he would sleep all year long, her hair intertwined in his fingers, except for a single hour. The girl's father sends seven young men to rescue her: a carpenter, who makes a ship; an ironmonger, who binds its parts together; a painter, who paints it; a sailor, who navigates it; a magician, who discovers the hiding place of the demon; a thief, who manages to steal away the princess from the demon's clutches; and a hunter, who kills the demon. To whom does the girl belong? The princess (of the frame story), unable to contain her certainty, is impelled to answer: the hunter.

The prince has won the princess for his wife by making her speak three times. He thanks the birds, who originally guided him; they are now freed of an enchantment and become two beautiful women, who will marry the prince's brothers. A triple wedding closes the tale.¹⁰

This complex story, which merits a full discussion beyond the limits of this introduction, traces a sequence of developmental transformation on several parallel levels: from silence to speech (the surface "problem" to be resolved in terms of the plot); from enchantment to disenchantment; from paradox to resolution; from lone, separate existence to the state of marriage; and from the status of an inanimate object to a living, mature, speaking subject. In addition to expressing and interweaving these complementary levels, the story is also a metanarrative on the riddle form, which tends to reproduce much of the same dynamic process embodied in the tale. The first answer uttered by the princess highlights the basic logical operation of the riddle: the act of concealing or clothing the naked truth in enigmatic and seductive ways. It is the tailor, after all, who, in the eyes of the princess, should win the woman made from wood. As the princess moves toward the final riddle, her choice, still somewhat arbitrary, enters a more destructive mode (the hunter who kills the demon becomes the husband-lover)—just as the solution to the riddle inevitably destroys the paradoxical image initially proposed. By the end, the para-

dox of speech has been resolved: two speaking birds become two disenchanted girls, now, like the princess herself, capable of forming a dialogic bond in marriage. But the disenchantment holds true in a wider sense: not only are the riddles arbitrarily pushed toward solutions that constrict the semantic space opened up by their initial formulation, but the closure provided in human and social terms also entails the same process of narrowing focus through which the seemingly fragmentary becomes seemingly complete. This narrowing range is surely related to the sense of disappointment that we have seen to inhere so often in a riddle's solution. The princess can now speak; the riddles have been answered; three marriages have taken place. A full subject—the hitherto mute princess—has matured through these trials, come fully alive, is able to speak of herself; yet this subject has also internalized and partly foreclosed a fragmented multiplicity of answers, or of prior selves. Only as a part of herself can this subject connect with another, also partial subject. As in the riddle-form itself, an enigmatic openness has been first articulated in rich symbolic language, then tested, explored, disenchanted, and finally expelled.

Let us list again the main thematic components present in this metariddling tale: (1) an initial difficulty in speaking, or an implicit privileging of silence, as a test of the inner readiness of both partners for the eventual dialogue of marriage; (2) the consistent movement from inanimate object to living beings endowed with voice, and capable of telling stories (always enigmatic ones, of course); (3) the progression (in the answers put forward by the princess) from clothing/disguising through healing to explicit aggression as conditioning and modulating any real connection with another subject—and also allowing the silent, listening subject to achieve her voice; (4) the theme of a trial instigated by male authority (the father) and directed at another male (the future husband), but ultimately resolved by the activation of the female and the creation of dialogue between the sexes; (5) the foreclosure and arbitrariness that the entire process of choice and categorization entails. All of these elements are integrally related to the underlying metaphysical structure of the riddle. Moreover, general and ongoing processes of enigmatization affect all the major levels in this story—intrapsychic, interpersonal, and linguistic.

The last of these themes—the enigmatic dynamics of language—illuminates the convergence between riddles and the wider domain of poetic discourse. The Indian folk tradition frequently associates the poet, who is mantically or magically gifted, with riddling of one kind or another. Thus the great Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa vanquishes a devouring Brahmin demon by answering his riddle-like questions—actually quotations from Pāṇini's enigmatic grammatical *sūtras*—with images drawn from the everyday life of the family and the home.¹¹ This direction of domestication, also common in the riddle proper, evokes the recurring sense of the life-and-death significance of the correct answer. Kālidāsa is always able to call forth the missing wisdom from his own magically empowered innerness: thus when a rock is dredged up from the Narmadā River and found to be engraved with letters, King Bhoja realizes that he has found a fragment of the lost *Rāmāyaṇa* epic composed by the monkey Hanuman (and jettisoned by Hanuman in chagrin at Vālmīki's superior text); but the verse is only partially legible—until Kālidāsa, reading the author's mind, reconstructs it to perfection. The legible part is the conclusion to the verse, which reads as follows:

*ayi khalu viṣamaḥ purākṛtānām
bhavati hi jantuṣu karmaṇām vipākaḥ*

How uneven and unfair, alas,
among the living
is the ripening of actions
accomplished long ago.

But what is the missing first half of the verse? How could anyone possibly know? What is the basis to this moralizing and generalizing statement? Here is Kālidāsa's reconstruction of the missing link:

*śivaśirasi śirāmsi yāni rejuḥ
śiva śiva tāni luthanti grdhrapādaiḥ*

Those heads that once grew
on Śiva's head
now roll, O Lord,
at vultures' feet.¹²

The verse now constitutes a whole, with an explicit moral (*arthāntaranyāsa*) as its conclusion:

Those heads that once grew
on Śiva's head
now roll, O Lord,
at vultures' feet.
How uneven and unfair, alas,
among the living
is the ripening of actions
accomplished long ago.

The "solution" is hardly less enigmatic than the initial problem, yet the images speak eloquently enough: even the great god Śiva has apparently lost his head or heads through the force of ripening deeds (*karma*); these heads belong now to the vultures, however unfair or uneven this process must seem. Once the "solution" is stated, its correctness is transparent to everyone; no one can doubt Kālidāsa's perfect knowledge, here expressed in a melancholy and poignant mode. A paradox remains: the poet cries pathetically, as if in prayer, to the same god, Śiva, whose heads he knows to be rolling at the vultures' feet. Note, too, the expressive theme, which recurs in so many Indian riddle-stories, of the head that must be sacrificed, severed, removed, before any real wisdom can be attained or revealed.

The poet, then, in this view, straddles a boundary between latent, or hidden, and external, more accessible realities; in India, the latter are usually felt to be fragmentary and partial realizations of the former. In the above stories, the poet's role is to decipher, in both cases in the context of a trial or challenge; but he also frequently uses language to create and manipulate "reality," often by mixing levels in metaphor and suggestion. Insofar as all real use of language entails a complex and subtle process of concealing, encoding, selecting, deciphering, and revealing, the poet's usage models speech generally—and the riddle, in its various forms, provides his natural paradigm.

Seen in the light of such stories, informed by an analytic bias toward the existential content of the form, riddling might thus be said to carry forward a process informed by three linked series of assertions (not necessarily in this sequence; each reflecting an initial, perhaps unresolvable doubt or query): this is who I am, as distinct from others (but first I may be someone else, perhaps even many other selves); this is how the world is, or is seen to be, as distinct from other potential worlds (with which it may nonetheless be linked); this is how words line up across from, or at the edges of, or within the inner structure of, our experience (thereby also selecting and fashioning that experience and bringing it into relation to our shifting awareness).

Call this our working hypothesis, to be examined, fleshed out, made explicit in specific textual and cultural contexts by each of the chapters here.

Notes

1. Cuppiramaṇiyaṇ n.d.: xliii. See also Bhagwat 1943.
2. See the excellent but now quite dated survey, Taylor 1939.
3. E.g., Georges and Dundes 1963; Kōngās-Maranda 1980; Lieber 1976.
4. E.g., Pepicello 1980.
5. See Scott 1976.
6. Cēṭṭiyār n.d.: 437–448.
7. See Kaivola-Bregenhøj: this volume.
8. See Vernant 1982.
9. Ramanujan 1991: 149–157.
10. Noy 1967: 116–122.
11. *Bhojacaritra* 1895: 65–66.
12. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

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2

Riddles and Their Use

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Riddles are a genre of oral tradition familiar in most cultures. The rapid cultural change that has taken place in Western countries in the past few decades has either dealt a death blow to the traditional genres of oral folklore or challenged them to adapt to new values, new interests, and meanings. The contexts in which tradition is performed and used have also undergone a complete change. In many cultures “true riddles” have passed out of use, and their place has been taken by trick questions, jokes, and crazy riddles following fast on the heels of one another as fashions change. Even the walls between genres have been broken down: the present-day jest cast in the form of a question and answer often comes closer to a joke than to a riddle.

In this article I will take a look at traditional true riddles. My basic material consists of Finnish riddles, and I will present both riddles and descriptions of their use. All the examples for which no source is quoted are taken from the Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society. Section 1 concentrates on riddling contexts and describes the social situations and cultural contexts in which riddles were posed. Section 2 examines two factors vital to riddle expression, namely ambiguity and riddle formulae. Section 3 describes a Finnish riddling game that has acquired features of play for punishing the unsuccessful riddlee. I will also debate, with the help of riddle variants and accounts taken from different cultures, whether it is possible to deduce the right answer from the image. In other words: Can a riddle be guessed?

Riddle Occasions

The term commonly used in speaking of the dimensions of the situation in which folklore is used is *context*. Linguists divide the concept into two parts: situational context, covering the discourse or performing situation and those taking part, and linguistic context, which in the case of folklore such as narratives or riddles refers to their place in the discourse.¹ In dealing with folklore it is also relevant to examine the cultural context, meaning on the one hand the occupation, culture, education, and other social factors of the tradition bearer, and on the other hand the culture in which

the tradition is used and the world of which it speaks.² In analyzing the riddle tradition it is the latter interpretation of cultural context that applies. Examination of context must also bear in mind the cognitive structures at the speaker's and the listener's command. Terry Winograd³ uses them in speaking of the narrative tradition, denoting "'a topic structure' representing what the discourse is about, a 'script' that is being applied, and a 'focus list' of things recently mentioned or thought about." This cognitive context is even more difficult to isolate than the other types of context, but recognizing that it does exist helps the researcher understand, for example, the reasons for thematic variations in the course of riddling or the chains of associations in the participants when there are several competing answers that fit a given image.

Riddles were long collected and studied as isolated texts, in many cases even so that the interaction between the image and the answer—and their presenters—was overlooked. This stressed the status of riddles as oral literature while completely forgetting the part they played in the interaction manifest as a game between two groups. In most cases riddles have been published without any information on the context whatsoever, and even the best accounts of riddling fail to give any information on what riddles were actually posed. It is clear, however, that the social context imposes and provides divergent levels ignored in analyzing riddles only as texts.⁴ Extensive folkloristic fieldwork among riddling communities has provided research with a wealth of information on the use of this genre.

The social or situational context of riddling can be divided into organized riddling sessions, which often also act as competitions, and incidental situations. The riddle occasion can be analyzed more precisely within this framework. In his informative article "Riddling: Occasion to Act," Thomas A. Burns divides riddling situations into six broadly different occasions.⁵ The first consists of riddles appearing as one component in various rituals. For example, many researchers have observed riddling during a wake.⁶ As this riddling situation, common in certain cultures, is alien and fascinating to the Protestant, let me quote the description of a situation given by Roger D. Abrahams. The wake he taped and published was held in April 1966 in St. Vincent, which belongs to the English-speaking West Indies. The situation was, according to Abrahams, typical:

It was noisy, boisterous, full of constant jokes and passing of bottles in and out the windows. In the yard, groups were playing guitars and singing popular songs; others were playing dominos, others drinking. Occasionally a verbal fight broke out because cursing (calling someone's name inappropriately) had occurred—according to my notes, an especially dramatic exchange occurred this night.⁷

During this wake eighty-two riddles were posed, including discussion. The light-hearted mood comes as something of a surprise, but then riddling is not part of a serious death rite—it is a way of killing time during the night vigil.⁸ Abrahams notes that "by the end of the riddling, the level of inebriation was quite high".⁹ The other riddle occasions registered by Burns are riddling within courting, riddling as an educational encounter between teacher and student, riddling upon meeting someone, and riddling which occurs in embedded form in other expressive genres, particularly narratives and songs. The sixth and most common occasion for riddling is leisure time, which is also the most common and best-known situational context.

Let us take a look at three examples illustrating leisure-time riddling in Finland. I will return later to the “trip to Hymylä” (*Hymy* = smile + locative suffix), where the riddlee who fails to guess the correct answer is jokingly sent. My material is taken from the collections of the Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society. In 1966 the Archive held a riddle-collection competition in order to supplement its already extensive material. This competition yielded about 30,000 riddles and some 500 pages of descriptions of riddle occasions which the contributors remembered from their youth. By the early 1960s riddling was no longer a genre used by adults, so that not a single riddle occasion could be taped in Finland. The situations reported by those answering the questionnaire applied to the period from the turn of the century to the 1920s, sometimes even as late as the 1950s. They therefore represent a bygone tradition, in the sense that young people today ask riddles chiefly in short sessions overlapping with some other form of discourse or socializing. Above all these are recollections, not reports of simultaneous events.

My first illustration tells about a spontaneous situation that could arise at any time (the narrator was born in 1909 and reckoned this happened in 1920):

But the riddles were always asked while we were working, during meals, and especially in the evenings as we went about our chores, and if there were any smutty-mouthed old men in the farm kitchen. Then you would hear some really coarse riddles, and how the old men would laugh if they managed to make us youngsters blush and stutter out some answer to their riddles. And if you didn't know the answer, they found it all the more amusing when you had to be told. For example, “The hairy one looks from under, slurps up bare-headed.—A lamb.” “Hangs in the daytime, put in a hole for the night. —A door hook.” These were sure to make us blush.

This account brings out the socializing in the evenings, when the people of the house got together to do the handwork and repairs necessary in a self-sufficient household and to pass the time together. These situations were important to the transmission of all oral tradition, for monotonous work was made lighter by entertainment in the form of oral folklore.

Riddles also carried novelty value, and a newly learned riddle might be asked in the course of conversation with friends or at the beginning of a school lesson. Some situation might also suggest a riddle image that did not, however, lead to any further riddling. One informant in fact mentions that the riddle was used much as if it were a proverb:

I was a young girl and spinning wool. Maija Tuomioaho dropped in and said, “A hairy thing lies on a thigh, looking to see when it can get in the hole.” I found this offensive, because it was so vulgar—I didn't take it as a riddle. My mother realised and said, “There it is on your lap.”

The next example also reports on a spontaneous meeting, but one which, it appears, frequently occurred when the young people met for a riddle session in a house in the village (the narrator was born in 1911 and dates the event as taking place in 1929. The account has been abridged slightly by omitting some of the examples):

Even in the 1920s people still remembered rather a lot of riddles here at Lakaniemi in Vimpeli. They were familiar to people of all ages, old and young alike. Whenever several youngsters happened to congregate for an evening, it often happened that they threw out a few riddles in between the chat. Sometimes they would spend a whole evening asking riddles and seeking

the answers. This was the case one Sunday evening in January 1929, at Matti Lehtoranta's, in other words at our house.

After describing the young people, four girls and five boys, who had come to spend the evening there, the narrator continues:

We got on to riddles and finding the answers to them. The first question was put by Urpo Harju: "It carried the living while it was alive, it carried the dead after its death and it moved across the living. What is it?" The question was addressed to all those present, as always. Anyone could suggest an answer. If the answer was wrong, the whole group went on thinking, including the person who had already answered. The girls could not be bothered to think for long. If the right answer took too long in coming, they answered just anything, knowing it would be wrong. Bertta Uusitupa gave at least two wrong answers to the question posed by Harju. She was a girl who easily laughed, and she accompanied her wrong answers with a hearty laugh, and because the answer was so crazy, everyone invariably joined in. And it so happened that we couldn't find the right answer at all, so Harju had to answer himself. "It's a pine, used to make a boat. When it was dead it was made into a boat for carrying dead fish, and the boat was rowed over living fish." Joking and laughing, we criticised this riddle, and I for my part said: "What a long, complicated explanation! No wonder we didn't guess it."—I tried to explain that riddles should be short and pithy, like "Take away, it increases, put back, it decreases." In reply I got the correct answer and explanation: "The cloth covering the smoke hole in the sauna. When you take it away, more light comes into the sauna, when you put it back, there is less light." I don't remember exactly whether anyone guessed this, or whether Toivo Harju knew it already.

Lots of questions were asked—. I think I asked more questions than anyone else. Toivo Harju and Lilja Lehtoranta asked lots of questions, though towards the end of the session Lilja withdrew, began making the coffee and setting the table. My father even joined in for a minute, throwing out a couple of riddles—. My father knew a lot of riddles, and he was one of the few who made them up himself.—

We had learnt most of the riddles at primary school under our teacher Oskari Harju, and the rest from older villagers and the day labourers who travelled from village to village.

"At around half past nine Lilja served us coffee, and while we drank it the talk moved on to other subjects. We then sat on for a while by the glowing fire, joking and each boasting a bit about how clever we had been in solving the riddles.

Brief though they are, the accounts do throw some light on riddle occasions as a versatile form of interaction. They tell not only about the mood of the occasion and the people present, but also about the roleplay of games and the status of the riddlers and riddlees. Various ways of finding the answer are revealed: deliberation, guessing, and knowing the answer in advance. We also gain insight into how a riddle should be, and into the process of learning and making riddles. The mood of this account differs greatly from that of the boisterous wake described by Abrahams, but as far as the game itself is concerned, the Finnish occasions have something in common with the St. Vincent riddling. To quote from Abrahams: "in the riddling sessions riddles were propounded not only to be solved but also to be discussed, argued about, laughed over, and sometimes dismissed."¹⁰

From the text-oriented point of view, riddles have appeared as a genre little regulated by the situational and linguistic context compared with, say, the narrative tradition. But is it all as simple as that? We have only a few accounts of complete riddle occasions,¹¹ but they speak plain language. In their performing context riddles are a

category either belonging together thematically or reminiscent of one another in structure. Roger D. Abrahams notes on the basis of his St. Vincent material: "One of the principles operating in the riddling sessions was that one riddle will sometimes suggest another; this suggestion can result from a framing element, from a method of description, from a technique of making the answer difficult—or simply from the subject."¹² Every riddle seems to have a place of its own: "The choice of riddles to be posed is not a random one, but instead each riddle ideally fulfills a function of helping to build a structural pattern for the session."¹³ This claim is supported by the following description from a Finnish folk milieu (the narrator was born in 1922 and dates the events in the mid-1930s):

As a rule the presenters of riddles began with a familiar theme, such as the objects in the living room, its inhabitants and animals, vermin, utensils and other things like that, and then gradually went on to more difficult and less familiar subjects, nature and the forests and lakes and their animals. It usually happened that one riddle soon led to another, especially anything misleading that was reminiscent of the previous object or some other riddling object but that referred to something quite different.

The children and schoolchildren of today also tell elephant jokes and modern crazy riddles in connected chains. The riddling discourse, in other words, consists of thematic entities in just the way familiar to us from telling situations.

The part played by cultural context is particularly significant in the cognitive process of riddles. The ambiguity inherent in riddles may be so empirical and culturally oriented that it remains a closed book to the outsider. People who share the same culture perceive shapes, forms, and actions in the same way, whereas outsiders, who "do not partake in common experiences and do not form symbols from the same substance, would not be able to relate these riddles in any meaningful way."¹⁴ Sometimes it is possible to show how a riddle can derive its entertainment value from local events, or from local geographical features. Local people's peculiarities are also potential material.¹⁵ An image of this type may be incomprehensible, both to the outsider and to other members of the riddling community. The research investigating the relationship between image and answer has to seek the opinion of many tradition bearers in trying to decipher the code. Riddles may in the course of time also get blunted once their users no longer have any living contact with the culture producing them. This has been the case with many riddles containing mythological names. Appearing in the misleading image elements of Finnish riddles are mythical beings which lost their meaning among riddlers long ago. The two Finnish hidden images in the universal riddle about the sun and the moon serve as a good example:

Two *Turja Lapps* ski the same track.

Two *earth spirits* skiing along the same track.¹⁶

The riddlee is effectively confused by calling his attention to the earth spirits and the *Turja Lapps*, which had already become unfamiliar figures.

Moreover, the link between riddle metaphors and cultural context may ultimately be the downfall of the entire genre. This has been the case in many Western societies in which technical progress, and with it industrialization, have been rapid. In Finland, for example, riddles used to be firmly linked with the conceptual and fantasy

world familiar to people making a living from agriculture and related occupations. The riddle metaphors are most often associated with objects, work, and animals familiar to all those present. The uniform material culture fostered the emergence and use of a uniform riddle tradition. Lyndon Harries¹⁷ stresses that the perception of the semantic fit between the image and the answer is an experience to be enjoyed. Often, however, the image does not say anything to the representative of a different culture. Riddles never adapted to changes in the material culture and became a culturally alien tradition. Leea Virtanen describes the situation in Finland:

Spinning, churning, seine fishing, and ploughing changed into strange work; while e.g. a still, pothooks, a baker's peel, spit, carding comb, sieve, quern, quill pen, the runners of a sleigh, a knapsack, scythe and millstones turned into strange articles. Central heating and electric lighting took the place of the fire burning in the stove or the forked stick for holding fir torches, not to speak of innumerable other changes: it was no longer taken for granted that there were lice in people's hair, porridge was not eaten from the same bowl, a pig no longer entered the living room, everyone learned to write (while before: "let him 'sow' who can").¹⁸

The imagery of riddles became strange and outdated. Marked riddle language (see chapter 2) was another reason why riddles began to seem unnatural. The images of some riddles are so neutral that they could have remained viable. For example, the following images connected with the observation of nature and traveling by boat do not appear outdated to the people of today:

A kettle is boiling out on the heath, without wood, without fuel.—An ant hill.

Backwards arching, it rocks in summer, it loafs on its nose in winter.—A boat.

But even riddles such as these gradually became outdated with the true riddle genre. The riddle language was difficult to command, and therefore spontaneous improvisation was not easy. Some riddles dealing with new subjects remained little more than clumsy attempts.

Many people who were active consumers of the riddle tradition in their youth stated in the course of a collection project carried out in Finland their explanations for why the tradition went out of use. Their opinions reveal some of the most subtle elements contributing to cultural change. The following informant was born in 1912 and gives a broad account of the background to the life of the tradition:

To my mind the reason for the loss of interest in the ancient riddles is education. When I was a child, there were none of the means of passing the time we have today. The ordinary family did not even have books, apart from the obligatory ones such as the Catechism, and the ABC book, and religious books like the Bible. Very few people older than me ever went to elementary school. Before I went to school, I borrowed the school books to read just for fun. Little by little there was a move away from the old. In my day Kärkelä Primary School already had a lending library from which the pupils could borrow books, both for themselves and their families.—People began to subscribe to more newspapers. They were read from cover to cover, and their subjects discussed. Then came the associations, the youth association, the small farmers association, the association for farming women, the study circle. These all came between 1925 and 1935. There were sewing circles, too, in winter, at least twice a week. Almost every young person was on some committee. Every association had an entertainments committee, and so on. So all at once the printed word began to gain ground. The unwritten literature of the people was forced to take a back seat, and being obsolete, got forgotten.

There are also frequent mentions of the radio and, in the 1960s, the spread of television: "People no longer needed to think up anything of their own; everything was provided on a plate. All the old things got pushed aside as inferior. People became more 'sophisticated,' even the way they talked, but some people made themselves quite ridiculous in trying to 'talk proper.'"

To this description may be added that during the period in question most villages got a shop and most areas a dairy, so that many household routines that had kept people together disappeared.

Once the images peculiar to riddling and the worldview it reflected became alien to the riddlers, the tradition no longer had a sounding board. There was no longer any point in telling riddles; they were not entertaining, and they did not arouse curiosity. And so they were forgotten. Something has, however, remained: the desire to test people, the desire to confuse the listener who has not yet spotted the link between the riddle image and answer. True riddles have lost their status, but all sorts of jokes, crazy humor, joking questions, and riddle parodies are among the resources that still command a place of their own in the cultural context in which we live. These new riddles are a form of entertainment and of questioning the contemporary values and norms reflected in them.

The Expressive Devices of Riddles

Riddles are made up of two parts: an image and an answer. In some cultures the image takes the form of a question, while in others—such as the Finnish riddle tradition—it is mostly a statement. The image however, is always an implicit question which, when presented in a riddling situation, requires the right answer. The question need not always be expressed verbally; for example, it can be drawn, indicated by means of gestures, or even drummed.¹⁹

Even in its simplest form, the language of riddles is usually so original that the riddle stands out from any surrounding discourse. Finnish riddles, for example, favor the Kalevala meter and even more frequently alliteration, whereas rhymes are less common. One consequence of the Kalevala meter is parallel images; likewise the fact that the riddle statements tend to be divided up into lines of set meter. Other special features of the language of riddles are the absence of a predicate verb in a repetitive statement ("A larder below, a mill on top and on the mill a dense copse"), euphony (*Heikki veikki venterikki, vääräsääri vänterikki, istui pellon piantarel* [Henry mandy dandy, bandy-legs galandy, sat at the side of the field]), and paradoxical images.

The language of riddles differs from spoken language, the deviations varying according to language and cultural region. In Northeast Scotland, for example, a riddle must rhyme to be considered good, or it must employ a formulaic opening or ending.²⁰ In the Fenno-Ugric Chereemis language, one of the characteristics of the riddle is its widespread use of onomatopoetic devices and more succinct language than usual.²¹

The succinct language typical of riddles is also pointed out by Eric Ten Raai, who notes that the riddles of the African Sandawe tribe are "seemingly less elabo-

rate than many European riddle sentences.”²² By European he no doubt means Anglo-Saxon and German riddles, which often display opening and closing formulae and rhyming questions. The language of riddles is in some cultures poetic, and on examining the contents of riddles it should be remembered that this linguistic form also imposes certain restrictions limiting the potential open to the riddle inventor.²³

Ambiguity

Marked riddle style sometimes even goes against linguistic norms—something that would not be acceptable in ordinary speech. The aim then is linguistic ambiguity, by means of which the riddlee is misled into focusing on the wrong detail. Ambiguity is encountered at the phonological, morphological and syntactical level of language; a detailed analysis of its uses in riddle language has been presented by W. J. Pepicello and Thomas A. Green in their book, *The Language of Riddles*.²⁴ An oft-quoted example of morphological ambiguity is the trick question “What’s black and white and red all over?—A newspaper,” in which there is a play of homophony between a simple lexical item (the adjective *red*) and a verb plus its past participle morpheme (*read*). This is obviously oral tradition, in which the different spelling of the words escapes the riddlee.²⁵ The answer to a popular riddle may, however, sometimes become familiar to the user of folklore. In this case he no longer exults in the ambiguity of language²⁶ unless the image is given a new interpretation. The trick question quoted here by way of example was so popular in America in the 1970s that people began to seek out ways which introduce humor and which would enable them to claim credit for wit. They do so by transforming the phonetic puzzle into a literal description of an object or being, then replacing the ambiguity of the riddle with an oddity in the solution, as the following answers demonstrate:

—A chocolate sundae with ketchup on it.

—A sunburnt zebra.

—A blushing zebra.

—A skunk with diaper rash.²⁷

When riddles are in active use, new interpretations such as these add to their entertainment and use value. The riddles quoted border on the crazy humor cultivated by young people and children, in which the right answer (known only to the riddler) culminates in laughter shared by all.

Above all, ambiguity is founded on exploitation of the potential of language and points to the situation that prevails when two or more different underlying semantic structures are presented by a single surface structure. The phonological form of an ambiguous structure is identical in all its semantic interpretations, but this correspondence may have several sources.²⁸ Riddles conceal and reveal their referent simultaneously. The ambiguities occurring in them may act “as operators that permit the transformation of categories and also their construction.”²⁹ It has also quite justifiably been pointed out that linguistic ambiguity can be supplemented by the riddlers’ knowledge of the sociopsychological world,³⁰ and apart from being purely linguis-

tic, it may be empirical, or it may be founded on social and cultural presuppositions. Thus, for example, the riddle "What belongs to yourself, yet is used by everybody more than yourself?—Your name" is possible only in a culture in which private ownership is taken as a matter of course and is the only form of ownership.³¹

Riddles are a genre displaying little improvisation or individual variation. The focal point of the riddle is the object, thing or concept given in the answer, and the statement constituting the image observes models of analogy peculiar to the genre. These models occur on the various linguistic planes. For example, in the riddles of the Finns³² and the Cheremis,³³ the majority of the fixed models of expression are based on some kind of paradox, antithesis (the linking of opposites), or, on a milder scale, contrast (the likening of different things). William Bascom reduces the basic form of the riddles of the African Yoruba tribe to an entity consisting of two conflicting, disproportionate, or impossible claims.³⁴

The following four schemes of the unexpected are to be found in Finnish riddles:

1. The negation of the prerequisite for the action or its expected and natural outcome, e.g.:

What runs without legs?—A cloud.

Take away, it increases, put back, it decreases.—Light when covering and opening the barn window.

Does not sink in water or rustle in hay.—Sunlight.

2. A biological or logical aberration arising from one of the following: the illogical relationship between a concept and its location; an epithet attached to a concept contrary to expectation; the interchanging of the characteristics of two antithetical concepts; or the illogical functioning of a concept, e.g.:

A stallion in the stable, its tail on the roof.—The kitchen stove.

What is the ox's eye on the wall?—A knot.

Shirt underneath, flesh on top.—A candle.

One mouse, two tails.—A shoe.

Fits in a small field but not in a large forest.—A twig harrow.

Dresses for the night, undresses for the day.—A bed.

3. Negation of the metaphor, e.g.:

Is as black as a priest but isn't a priest,
sings like a choir master but isn't a choir master,
flies like a bird but isn't a bird,
goes underground like a worm but isn't a worm.—A dorbeetle.

4. Bypassing of the extreme value or symbol of a property, e.g.:

What is blacker than a raven?—Sin.

Higher than a horse, lower than a pig.—A saddle.³⁵

These schemes of expectation apply to the image. Including the answer in the investigation, we see that the image plays with an impossibility that proves, once the

answer is known, to be self-evident and expedient. The relationship between image and answer is often allegorical. The “black bird” that “gets in its nest and sings” can only mean a priest up in the pulpit; once the allegorical hidden image has been solved, it is empty and of no importance.³⁶ The impossible image of the riddle is always bound to the special nature of the genre so that even the most apt of images is a disposable product, and the criterion for the aptness of a contradictory claim is the answer.

Formulae

Moving on from the logical-semiotic, or image and concept, models to the verbalization of the riddle tradition, we again find a host of expressive models. The structural models of minor folklore have been studied in Finnish folkloristics,³⁷ and the term *formula* has been used to denote a basic scheme, a general mold for small-scale folklore such as proverbs and riddles in which it is possible to use the model to cast new, conforming folklore products having the same structure. The term formula is not, however, used only to denote the scheme of a riddle in folkloristic literature. It has not yet come to be used as such in connection with any specific research aspect; nor does it exclude any given approach: the “ground plan” can be interpreted as a morphological-syntactic, stylistic, or semantic crystallization. Matti Kuusi notes in speaking of his proverb studies that the analysis has to be compressed, for there are numerous formulaic features. He also stressed that the seeming distance of the syntactic structures does not prevent them from being used as functional alternatives to one another, and that formal proximity, or identity, does not guarantee functional affinity.³⁸

Turning to true Finnish riddles, it is possible to pick out seventeen formulae that cover 50–55 percent of all riddles. They adhere to different criteria, and each model is usually regulated by several criteria simultaneously. Analysis of these formulae calls for a recognition of the expressive devices peculiar to the Finnish language and study of the way they are used as models in the riddle genre. The most common ones are the morphological-syntactic and stylistic criteria, but allowance must also be made for the number of structural elements and their position in the riddle statement. Sometimes, on the other hand, applications of a formula can best be defined as realizations of a given image.

Riddles are an international genre, however, and if we take a look at Estonian and Karelian riddles alongside the Finnish, we notice some obvious similarities. Like the Finnish riddles, the Estonian material fits the seventeen most common basic schemes studied by me, and 43 percent of the comparative Karelian material can be analyzed using them.³⁹ Estonian and Karelian are indeed closely related to Finnish, so similarity can be expected in their expressive means. It is not merely a question of language however, but also of the cultural contacts between language areas in close proximity to one another, both among themselves and with their nearest Indo-European language area: Finland with Sweden, Estonia with Germany, and Karelia with Russia. As riddles have been lifted from one culture and language to another, so the linguistic expression has been preserved as far as possible. Examination of the riddles of Finland’s Swedish-speaking minority reveals that about 30 percent of riddles can be analyzed according to the expressive means used in Finnish.⁴⁰ This result speaks

both of a common cultural area and above all of the fact that some formulae are on the formal or structural level, which is independent of language.⁴¹ The difference between the languages is, however, clear to see, for the laconism of the Finnish riddles is replaced in the Swedish ones by wordiness, alliteration by rhyme, and so on.

An example of an international formula crossing many language borders is the *two-member antithetical formula* as manifest in the following Finnish riddles:

1. Lies idle in summer, moves in winter.—A sledge.
2. Stands in water, falls on land.—A net.
3. Born twice, dies once.—A bird.
4. In the "belly" in summer, on your back in winter.—A fur coat.
5. Frontwise in the evening, backwise in the morning.—An oven vent.

The bases of the formula classification are the regularly recurring structural elements of the traditional genre and their manner of linkage. It is necessary to define the basic unit of the analysis so that we can name the criteria of the ground plan or model of the formula. This unit I term the *formula member* and it is also the smallest independent structural unit of the analysis, though it, in turn, is made up of member components. The degree to which individual riddles are bound to the formula is determined by means of *formula criteria*. By examining the structure and number of the member as well as the regularities prevailing between them, we can elucidate the criteria of the formula. The antithetical formula comprises a group of structurally fixed, two-part riddles. The formula members are an unspecified adverbial such as one of time, place, manner, or other, and a predicate verb (riddles 1–3); or adverbial and either a nominal or an adverb (riddles 4–5). The formula itself is the combination of two antithetical members.

This formula is popular with riddlers, and my comparative analysis clearly exhibits its creative variety. The formula member does not alone suffice as a criterion for conformity; it must also contain the antithesis of the components of the two members. The application of the formula in different languages indicates that this antithetical structure is common within European limits. Here are a few examples of riddles in English⁴² and German:⁴³

Goes up unready (with difficulty), Comes down ready.—Wallpaper.

Something goes down laughin' an' comin' up crying.—A bucket.

Hard on the edge, and soft in the middle.—A bed.

My father has a thing, it's green outside and white inside.—A coconut.

Wächst im winter, dorret im sommer.—Eisapfen.

Hinten frisst's und vorne kommt's.—Dreschmaschine.

Des Tages Hohl, und des Nachts voll.—Mausefalle.

Oben spitz und unten breit,

durch und durch voll Sässigkeit.—Zuckerhut.

In evaluating how the formula spans cultures, more extensive study should be made of the verbal traditions germane to different languages and cultural areas. It is also important to distinguish riddle variants in different languages from independent

applications of a particular formula typical of one language area. Only then is it possible to determine how productive a formula is.

Among this two-member antithetical formula are some riddles that incorporate the devices of several formulae. In fact, a syntactic-stylistic model often provides the means for the implementation of ideas varying somewhat in content. There are a number of borderline cases for every model—riddles similar to one another in their verbalization yet dissimilar in their semantic realization.⁴⁴ The starting point for the classification was a corpus of Finnish riddles in which the applications of this antithetical formula are simultaneously regulated by four criteria, namely, (1) the structure of the formula members, (2) the minimum number of members, (3) the stylistic criterion and (4) the syntactic criterion. The riddles I have compared indicate that criteria 1–3 are adaptable as such to the classification, by means of the formula, of the riddle tradition in different languages. With reference to this formula the stylistic criterion of antithesis is all-pervasive and extends to the expression of both components of the members (“lies in summer, moves in winter”). The two-member antithetical formula is an example of a riddle pattern in which the degree of crystallization varies somewhat in the applications of the formula in different languages. An example of this are English language applications in which the verbal component varies from a single verb to a verb plus modifiers (“lives-dies,” cf. “shineth bright—is raked up in its own dirt”). These individual divergences do not, however, change the overall picture of the crystallization of the formula. All the generalizations are based on the frequency with which formulae appear in the material.

Let us take an example of the *content-level formula* “A full of B,” applications of which are possible in all languages because the formation of the riddle is regulated by neither syntactic nor stylistic criteria. The expression of the formula applications is in this case determined purely in accordance with the lexical “full” member and the content-criteria created by it. The formula member is the same *A full of B* expression in the comparative material in different languages:

Finnish:

A doorless shed, full of food.—An egg.

A red rafter with lots of white chickens.—Gums and teeth.

Swedish:

A bottomless tub sails on the Åland Sea full of meat and blood.—A ring.

A house full of meat, no door to go and eat.—A nut.

Russian:

A pen full of white chickens.—Teeth.

English:

A little house full of meat, no window or doors to get something to eat.—An egg.

Among the optional criteria of the formula is the attribute attached to either component of the member. This is most often adjectival, sometimes numerical. The pair of adjectives attached to the components is usually one of the contrasting clichés typical of riddles.

It should be remembered, however, in assessing the international distribution of formulae, that a riddle may sometimes be more familiar than the formula, for the counterparts of a given riddle in different languages may be expressed by means of several different formulae.

Some of the riddle formulae operate at the linguistic level. In the classification by Alan Dundes⁴⁵ this represents the level that is completely dependent on the language in question. Belonging to this level are, for example, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeic and other stylistic devices. In contrast to the structural level, it is also called the textural level. A central riddle idea expressed at the textural level cannot be translated into another language. Good examples of this are the Cheremis riddles using onomatopoeia as their expressive device. Onomatopoeia is typical of both the spoken language of the Cheremis and the language of literature and folklore. The onomatopoeic vocabulary of the Cheremis falls into three main categories describing (1) sound, (2) appearance, or (3) feeling. In as many as 11 percent of their riddles, one of the vital constituents is onomatopoeic. The riddles made up entirely of onomatopoeic words often describe a work process, such as plowing, sowing, or treating hemp. It is interesting to note that the meaning of the onomatopoeic words usually only becomes clear in the context. Their semantics may nevertheless become established, so that, for example, the vocabulary of the riddle *Cip cip, kup kup, apšat plak δôl δal*, meaning a wedding, is repeated in other riddles referring to weddings. Descriptive words thus acquire fixed meanings and cannot be used arbitrarily. Sirkka Saarinen, who has studied Cheremis riddles, notes that a speaker with a command of onomatopoeic words may be able to interpret descriptive riddles.⁴⁶

Another example of language-oriented expressive models is the spoonerism. This phenomenon is presumably familiar in many languages, but its popularity and devices vary. One of the few English spoonerism riddles I know is:

What is the difference between a nun in church and a nun in the bath?—One has hope in her soul and the other has soap in her hole.

A spoonerism is either a reversal of the initial sounds of words, as in our example, or a reversal of words (“What is the difference between a donkey and a postage stamp?—One you lick with a stick, the other you stick with a lick”) that makes the riddle witty.⁴⁷ The Finnish language has endless potential for spoonerisms. The most common practice is to present the listener with a pair of words whose first syllables can be exchanged to yield what is most often a risqué result. It is entirely language-oriented, but here nevertheless are a few examples. Twists on names are particularly popular—*Salkku-Mutainen* / *Mulkku-Satainen* (Briefcase Mutainen [name] / Working Louse), or a name equipped with an epithet: *paljas uneksiija Kullervo Pellinen* / *uljas paneksiija Pellervo Kullinen* (the bare dreamer Kullervo Pellinen [name] / the gallant fucker Pellervo Pussy-pusher). The listener may also be presented with phrases in which either adjacent pairs of words change places, or else a noun is attached to two fixed words. Spoonerisms are a source of entertainment for both children and adults. The final outcome is always left for the listener to guess. His laughter proves whether or not the message went home.

In analyzing formulae it is not sufficient to operate merely at the level of verbalization; allowance must also be made for the semantic expressive scheme concealed in the linguistic model. The perspective must then be broadened from the image to the conformities governing the linking of the image with the answer. Closer analysis of one Finnish riddle formula, the *nominative absolute*,⁴⁸ proved that the semantic

structure of the formula is far more heterogeneous than the syntactic structure. At the syntactic level the riddle has five components:

- (1) A man
- (2) in the earth,
- (3) his hair
- (4) in the wind
- (5) Answer: A turnip.

Classification of the applications of this formula according to the main semantic binary features appearing in the material yields the following oppositions: + animate, + inside, + nature, + part of A, + correlates with A, and + part of the body. These semantic features fall into categoric features representing characteristics of the components and features reflecting the relationships between components. Analysis of the research material established that the majority of the theoretically possible feature combinations were in fact never used in applications of the nominative absolute formula. Some of the combinations have not been used because of a logical inconsistency in the scheme, while others belong to a register of the expressive potential of the genre that has not yet been exploited but that could be used to create new riddles. The feature combinations manifest in the material form a group of contentual schemes with which it is possible to verify the semantic choices and limitations that must be familiar to the inventor of the riddle.

Forty-six contentual schemes are needed to classify the 106 nominative absolute riddles in my material according to the criteria presented. The most popular is:

- (1) ++ (2 varies) (3) --- (4) +++ Answer -- or Answer +-

Let me take a few examples of this pair of schemes:

An old woman at the oven with two pies between her teeth.—An oven and two shelf beams.

A man standing on the hill, iron trousers on his legs.—A pitchfork.

A little man in the woods, a rain hat on his shoulders.—A mushroom.

An old man fell off the oven, a washbowl in his arse.—A cockroach.

This scheme applies to 36.7 percent of my research material.⁴⁹ There are, however, far more contentual schemes that are theoretically possible: 1,944 in fact. There are also a number of borderline cases that reinforce the concept that one syntactic expression model covers many semantic schemes. The riddler is also regulated by the clear and clichéd rules at the level of content, however. For example, the applications of the nominative absolute formula in my material do not include any answers referring to a human. Breaking this rule is against the norms, and the riddle may fail to win popularity. Variations at the semantic level nevertheless appear to be far more common than those at the syntactic or stylistic level.

Before arriving at a synthesis applying to the riddle genre as a whole—sought by scholars, though its very existence has sometimes been doubted⁵⁰—it is necessary to study bit by bit the rules for making riddles, and thus to chart the “generic grammar” observed by those inventing and using riddles. The scholar with large riddle collections at his disposal soon notices that classification can almost never hope to

be exhaustive. Having distinguished an expressive model, the scholar immediately comes across more liberal applications of the model and deviations. It is obvious that he must chart not only the rules but also their exceptions. He will be forced to note that riddles are created not out of the mechanical combination of structural elements but by a series of options whose conformity allows creative improvisation.

Even at this stage it is easy to observe that many opening formulae are made up of certain basic elements that can be combined in different ways. Let us take as an example a group of riddles containing similes:

Seisoo ku saksa, istuu ku isäntä, rätäjää ku rakkikoira.—Vokki.

Stands like a traveling shopkeeper, sits like a master, barks like a cur.—A spinning wheel.

Päästä kun kerä, keskeltä kun säkki, perästä kun keppi.—Kissa.

Like a ball at the head, like a sack in the middle, like a stick at the back.—A cat.

Lattian leveys, lehden keveys.—Savu.

Broad as the floor, light as a leaf.—Smoke.

Puun pituinen, punalangan paksuinen.—Puun sydän.

Length of a tree, fat as a red thread.—Pith of tree.

Musta kun pappi, eik ou pappi,

lentää kuin lintu, eik ou lintu,

möyryvää kuin härkä, eik ou härkä,

männöö muan ala kun mato, eik ou mato.—Sitsonitijainen.

Black as a parson but isn't a parson,

flies like a bird but isn't a bird,

bellows like a bull but isn't a bull,

goes underground like a worm but isn't a worm.—A dung beetle.

Mikä on hanhea valkoisempi?—Enkeli.

What is whiter than a goose?—An angel.

Mikä on mustaa mustempi?—Murhe.

What is blacker than black?—Grief.

Hevosta korkeampi, sikaa matalampi.—Satula.

Higher than a horse, lower than a pig.—A saddle.

Julmempi kuin susi, nöyrempi kuin lapsi.—Tuli.

Crueler than a wolf, more humble than a child.—Fire.

Pienempi Jumalaa, suurempi kuningasta.—Surma.

Smaller than God, greater than a king.—Death.

Enemmän muas reikii kuin taivaas tähti.—Sänki.

More holes in the ground than stars in the sky.—Stubble.

One thing shared by all these riddles is their comparison. But if we compare the morphological structure of an individual comparative element, the coherence or

composition of comparative elements and the number of elements in the riddle statement, we see some differences. Approaching the examination via the stylistic characteristics, we may see the following differences in the riddle sentences: a property is compared to a concrete symbol of it (whiter than a goose); the metaphor and the object referred to are expressed using the same word (blacker than black); the second element refutes the first, because the vital attribute of X does not refer to X (black as a parson but isn't a parson); there is direct opposition between the elements (higher–lower), or the opposition is indirect (crueler–humbler), but despite the direct opposition of the adjectives in the riddle image the elements are not necessarily opposed to one another (smaller than God–greater than a king). The analysis can then be modified by estimating the importance of Kalevala meter and alliteration in the verbalization of the riddle image (*seisoo ku saksä, istuu ku isäntä*). It is also necessary to examine the semantic relationship between the image and the answer. Looking at the above group of examples, we immediately spot the abstract answers “angel”, “grief”, and “death”, which deviate from the object, animal, and concept referents familiar in an agrarian milieu.

The above examples also clearly prove that the closer the properties of some expressive model are defined, the larger the number of criteria required becomes. Since the formula analysis method begins by examining the crystallization and variation of a folklore item, it can also be developed case by case according to the approach required by the material. Formulae are no more commensurable at the level of linguistic expression than they are at the level of content. There is no universally valid method of distinguishing formulae and their characteristic features; formula analysis involves the application of different research aspects.

The crystallized means of expression—the formulae—used by the riddling tradition provide the riddler with a way of supplementing his repertoire and inventing new items for the riddling community. The language of riddles is, however, difficult to command. Proof of this are the hundreds of riddles of which there is only a single variant in the Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society. Often these riddles clearly offend some rule of riddling grammar, and they have for this reason never passed the test of the riddling community. They have remained one-shot products used by a small circle, but at the same time they reflect an ability to improvise on tradition and to exploit the potential of language. Correspondingly, some popular riddles may run to several hundred variants.

The expert in the riddle tradition must have a command of the various components characteristic of the genre: its vocabulary, metaphors, antithetical and paradoxical images, morphological-syntactical structures, and, above all, skill at combining them in accordance with the semantic codes of the genre.

From Riddle to Answer

All riddling situations involve some form of competition; however, they may vary from specially arranged contests between two teams and the audience to free-form questioning inserted in the rest of the discourse. In each case there are two opposing parties, one of which is in possession of knowledge with which it tests the other.

Researchers who have conducted fieldwork among communities that still have an active riddling tradition stress the importance of the riddle poser. At the start of riddling he clearly holds a higher status than the riddlee. If, however, the riddlee passes the test, the statuses are temporarily equalized. He may even be compared to the initiate who, in the course of a *rite de passage*, accedes to a status equal to the initiated who initiates him.⁵¹ The poser has been regarded as holding both intellectual and social power: "Intellectually the poser has the knowledge required to answer the riddle; socially, the power to determine whether an answer offered is acceptable."⁵² Accounts of Finnish riddling clearly stress the status of the riddlee. Again, there is power involved, for a person who gives a wrong answer could be symbolically or playfully banished by the group posing the riddles.

The Journey to Hymylä

Success in riddling is universally followed by at least a momentary rise in status. Good guessers are often mentioned by name in Finnish accounts. Similarly, poor guessers may have to pay for their ignorance by enduring scorn and teasing, or even concrete punishments.

Some ballads and folktales tell of riddling battles in which the loser may even have to forfeit his life. Competitions between two teams are also known in some cultures; however, it is more common to frame a riddle with an opening and closing cliché challenging those present to a contest, with a promise of honor or a reward, or sometimes—to the contrary—a threat of playful punishment:

The fruit of England and the flower of Spain / Met together in a shower of rain, /
Bound with a napkin, tied with a string / *Tell me this riddle, and I'll give you
a ring.*

Behind the king's kitchen there is a great vat, / And a great many workmen work-
ing at that, / Yellow is their toes, yellow is their clothes. / *Tell me this riddle
and you can pull my nose.*⁵³

In meines Vaters Garten / Seh ich sieben Kameraden, / Kein ein, kein Bein, / Kann
niemand erreichen. / *Wer dieses kann raten, / dem will ich geben einen Dukaten.*
/ *Wer dieses kann denken, / Dem will ich einen Louisdor schenken.*⁵⁴

Such playful exhortations are not used in Finland as a frame for riddling. Here in Finland riddling sometimes included a dramatic game called "Hymylä" for punishing an unsuccessful riddlee. The oldest known account of the game appears in the *Aenigmata Fennica*, published by Christfrid Ganander in 1783, and many occasions were reported in rhyming Kalevala-meter poetry in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The most recent accounts of this folklike farce are given in direct narrative, and it was still remembered at the time of a riddle collection made in 1966.

There were three main episodes in the drama: the departure for Hymylä, the visit to Hymylä, and, on the return, the account of the journey. Before the game began, the participants agreed how many riddles could be answered wrongly before a riddlee was sent off to Hymylä. Usually the number was three. There were two main roles in

the drama: the incompetent riddler, and the opposing group that put the sentence into practice. The departure for Hymylä might take place symbolically to the accompaniment of a jingle: "If you didn't know, you got sent to Hymylä. They said: '*Hyys, hyys* to Hymylä, for not knowing that.'" Sometimes the traveler was given more concrete advice: "If there were some people in the group who could not guess three-four riddles, they were sent to Hymylä with the words '*Hyys, hyys* to Hymylä, you don't know anything.' This is a place of punishment to which the ignorant were sent. The people sent there had to dress up to look particularly stupid so the other people in the game could have some fun." Hymylä was usually outside the room in which the riddling took place, so the traveler had to leave the other players and go out into the yard or the hall.

Sometimes other roles were added to the trip to Hymylä. Some of the people carrying out the sentence would pretend to be the people of Hymylä, who would talk to the luckless traveler and amuse the rest of the group by reporting on the reception and treatment afforded the traveler:

Thus the girl was soon ready for Hölmölä [the name varies]. Now, she was dressed in the most odd, "billygoat" fashion and was sent out of the living room. Then began the guessing about how she would be received in Hölmölä. Someone tells that Hölmölä's dogs are barking, so the children go to see what they are barking at, and they bring back the news that a ragged old woman is coming who's drawn by a cat and the sleigh's upside-down. In addition, she has horns on her head. Hölmölä's housewife takes fright just as she is salting her butter, and in her fright she throws ashes instead of salt in her butter, then overturns the milk pail into the hearth and lights the fire with her church silk. The daughter of the house turns a slops bucket over the stranger's eyes. When the latter asks to be allowed to wash, she is given a tar bucket and ordered to dry herself with bedding straw. Then she is asked about news from the world. When she doesn't know what else to say apart from those unsolved riddles, the poor creature, the likes of her, is pitied and given chaff mixed with buttermilk, the heads of last year's herrings and the holes of ring bread for her food.

Obviously Hymylä is a topsy-turvy world in which all the customs and practices of our world are reversed. The accounts of the traveler's reception vary in their details, but it is always clear that he or she is made to look ridiculous. The devices reported in the accounts to trigger laughter are partly clichés. Usually the visit is described by explaining that everything in Hymylä is different from the normal world. Deviation from the "right" way of doing things was a source of comedy. One popular device utilizes pairs of elements turned upside down: "The porridge was stirred with an axe, the firewood chopped with a ladle." Changing roles was a sure source of comedy: "The cows were baking, the women on a leash, the horses were making ale, the farmers were in the stalls. The boys were yapping at the manor, the dogs sat eating round the kitchen table. The daughters were grunting in the pigsty and the pigs were preening themselves in the parlour."

The visit to Hymylä might end with the "mistress of Hymylä" telling the disgraced traveler the answers to the riddles he or she did not know. The shameful journey was over, and the traveler was allowed to return. He was now expected to give a report of his journey. If he was able to improvise an amusing story, he had a chance to make good his loss and win the approval of his fellows. The following story of a "dumbbell's" journey was noted down in Lapland at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

Wonders I saw when I visited Hämälä: Pigs blended, cows baked; sheep distilled and dogs litigated; snow buntings chopped wood, swallows cleft wood into shingles; a titmouse wove sticks, a squirrel carved beams. Cooking was done with an axe, chopping was done with pots; a wolf mixed, the tail slept; a hare ground flour, the head trembled. A log drew, an ox shook; the sleigh lasted, the road fell apart.⁵⁵

Some of the lines seemed to have been standard material in accounts of Hymylä, but the narrator had endless potential for using his or her imagination. As such, the role-exchange is not a device of the Finnish Hymylä game alone, for it is known internationally as a form of popular jesting and even appeared in the literature of antiquity.⁵⁶ Although punishments are part of the final reckoning in riddling situations, the trip to Hymylä seems to be exclusively Finnish as a punishment game, though there is one report from South Estonia. In Finland some of the lines in the trip to Hymylä are said to have counterparts in Kalevala epic poetry. Leea Virtanen points out that the jingle recalls an incantation scheme: "The guesser is treated like a bad disease; he is exorcised to go his way to the place where he belongs, and his conveyances are recited. However, whereas the conveyer in incantations is often the horse of Hiisi 'with iron reins along its flanks, an iron sleigh behind,' the traveling equipment of the one being driven to Hymylä is parodically amusing and trifling."⁵⁷

The trip to Hymylä sometimes also involved the paying of forfeits. The options were usually work, money or "bodily suffering." The work might, for example, be carrying water or chopping wood, but various jests were also possible:

The work often consisted of anything crazy. The person might, for example, be ordered to wash his or her face in a tar bucket and to wipe it on a chaff bin or the sooty beams of a Lapp tent. Others promised to pay their forfeit in money; this was the easiest way, because it only involved a trifling sum. The bodily suffering was usually tickling, which was far from playful as it was so thorough you still remembered it the following day.

Although it was only a game, the trip to Hymylä was somewhat disgraceful and frightening. "The trip to Hymylä was so frightening that it was liable, even later at night, to disturb sleep if one had received that rebuke in the evening." The reason for this fear was that the playful punishment in any case meant that the sufferer became the center of attention and was in fact proclaimed unfit as a member of the riddling community. The enforcement of the punishment also meant temporary expulsion from the community. The recollections of the course of the game are explicit in their admiration of a good guesser and the scorn and shame poured on a bad one: "Anyone who could not guess the answer therefore had to go and fetch wood or water and to shout at the door: 'It's stupid I am.'" Or: "Those who guessed quickly were admired. People sometimes shouted: 'The rutabaga cuts! The head shines! The sawdust in his head has just been changed. There's no rag in his head.' The one who did not guess might be called: 'Dim attic, off to Hymylä (with you). Talks like a rotten sheep's head.'" Although the shameful visit to Hymylä and the cries of scorn that accompanied it were the fate of several riddlers in turn, the lot of the scorned was not an easy one.

The trip to Hymylä represents a form of folk comedy at its most typical. The grotesque jesting gives rise to extreme hilarity in the group, which momentarily expels one of its members by traditional means and tests the limits of his or her tolerance. There is little mention of how the victim feels, but this is clearly indicated in

passing. One might stress that “we did our best to remember, to make sure we didn’t get sent to Himola, because that was a disgrace,” or “people were loath to join in the riddling for fear of being disgraced.” We also know that it was forbidden to get angry. In any case, the trip to Hymylä never ended in lasting disgrace. Once the traveler had suffered his punishment, he was taken back into the group. Bygones were bygones, though they might be difficult to forget. Sometimes the traveler would in turn become the riddler. In any case the game continued until it was time for the next person to set off for Hymylä.

Can Riddles Be Guessed?

Many definitions of riddles stress that true riddles “give the hearer enough information to guess the answer—Descriptive riddles or riddles in the strict sense can usually be solved without great difficulty.”⁵⁸ Taylor’s views may be founded on the riddle research published in German by Antti Aarne in 1918–1920. Aarne claimed that one feature of true riddles was that solving them called for invention and sharp wit.⁵⁹ Guessing is also mentioned as one way of solving a riddle in the definition of the genre given by Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes in their article published in 1963. The focal point of this definition does in fact lie elsewhere, and the mention of guessing may be an ancient relic from the literature.

How in fact are riddles solved? There are many answers to this in different cultures. The Finnish appellation for the genre of riddles (*arvoitukset*) and a few other terms used (*arvuuttelija*: riddle poser and *arvata*: to make a guess) accentuate the notion that a listener actually guesses what purport a riddle image, presented to him, conceals within itself,⁶⁰ but it is worth adopting a new perspective and asking: Does the competence of a folklore adept imply an ability to derive from a riddle image precisely the correct answer which the poser and the riddling community expect of him?

The extensive archive collections of Finnish riddles offer one perspective on the issue. A second is opened up by the field studies conducted by folklorists among communities using riddles. It is easy to pick out examples of Finnish riddles proving the wide variation possible in the answers to a single riddle image. Here, for example, is one included in the riddle collection published by Christfrid Ganander in 1783:

A mug made in Tuonela, the hoops were cast up here.—A well.

[Tuonela is the underworld of ancient Finnish mythology.]

There are numerous alternative answers to this particular riddle, but three are featured more than any other: a cow’s horn (thirty-one variants), a well (twenty-seven), and a ring (fifteen). The answers to different variants often fall into groups in which the same referent is varied slightly. The “well” answer thus takes in a further three variants the answer to which is a well bucket, while the following variations appear on the cow’s horn answer: a calf with horns growing (four), a calf (two), and a calf and cow (two). In addition to these answers, the riddle may also incorporate the following referents on the theme of the newborn child (twenty-six variants in all): having a baby, the birth of a baby, giving birth to and clothing a child, a child, a babe-in-arms, a baby’s christening. “The moon” is the answer to eight variants. The following

individual answers might also be given to this riddle: birth and engagement, a bride, church bells, a coffin, an egg, a field roller that is born, a finger and a glove, a hole in the ice, a human being, a hymnbook, money, a pot, a pot and handle, the sea and shore, snow, a spinning wheel, a spring, a still, the sun, a well and spring, and a window. Five riddles have been noted down without an answer. There are 155 known variants of this riddle.

This riddle nevertheless displays little variation compared with the numerous riddles to which hundreds of users have decided on one and the same answer. The variation in the answers is an indication that the relationship between the image and the referent is on the one hand well thought out; on the other hand, it is undoubtedly the result of pure conjecture. Sometimes the image may be so semantically vague that there are several suitable answers. In some variants of our example riddle, the Kalevala-meter *Tuoppi tehty Tuonelassa* (A mug made in Tuonela) is replaced by the line *Tuolla maalla tuoppi tehty* (In that land a mug is made), which sounds much the same. In both cases the riddle applies the near–far formula, possibly emphasizing not so much the Tuonela concept as the contrast between near and far widely familiar in the riddle tradition. Many concepts that may at first sight appear strange thus present themselves as answers.

The different answers attached to the same riddle image may also have their origins in different riddling communities. In our example riddle, the distribution of the main answers—cow’s horns, a well, and a ring—would appear to support this assumption. There is some overlapping in the regional distribution of the answers, but the main regions clearly shun one another. The “well” answer centers around Western Finland; the “ring” answer around North Ostrobothnia and neighboring Kainuu. “Cow’s horns” is the answer given partly in the same regions as “ring,” but it tends more toward Eastern Finland.

The wide range of answers does not do full justice to the life of the tradition, however. In order to complete the picture, we need more information about the people using the tradition and their choices. The riddling communities in which it would still be possible to observe the various roles and the competence of members of the community are nowadays inaccessible to the Finnish researcher. Field research can be exchanged for archive research, however, because the Folklore Archive of the Finnish Literature Society contains hundreds upon hundreds of riddle variants used by riddling communities. By studying variants it is possible to prove that each riddle image—even those that seem most senseless—in most cases has only one acceptable answer in its performing context. The people supplying riddles appear only in exceptional cases to have told the collector that a particular riddle image had several answers. Of the 155 variants in my material there are only three for which the riddle collector has noted down two different answers.

Nonetheless, it is quite possible to imagine some exceptional situations. When the image is presented for the first time and no one but the poser knows the right answer, the riddlee might be stimulated to try out various alternatives. As has been shown in the preceding accounts, these attempts tended to end in communal laughter. On the other hand, the refusal to accept any alternative answers was the subject of later debate, and the name of any riddlee who made too many mistakes remained in the mind of the reporter for decades to come. Teasing opponents by changing the

answer was not always permissible, for the group control generally regulated the course of the game. The answers had to be "right." The trip to Hymylä also reinforces the concept that riddles had to have a single answer unanimously accepted as correct by the riddling community.

Only one situation is known in Finland in which the answer to a riddle could be temporarily changed. This was when someone made the mistake of asking a riddle with a sexual answer within earshot of children. Usually in this case the riddling would be broken off and the subject changed: "Children were sometimes asked tricky riddles, but never any that could refer to something else. If a boy, or come to that a man, happened to ask something that could have been indecent, the other adults would butt in and even put an end to the riddling altogether."

Examination of high-frequency riddle variants reveals that the answer is not arrived at by arbitrary means. The riddle "A man in the living room, his hair in the wind"⁶¹ has 136 variants in the archive collections. The answers fall into two main categories, one of which centers round the fireplace and smoke, the other around the living room and the supporting beam. The relationship between the riddle image and the answer is therefore either "the relationship between a man and his hair = a fire and smoke" or that between the living room and the supporting beam. In this case the riddle thus permits two interpretations of equal status. Both would appear to be equally logical to the riddlee, who knows from his own living environment how a fireplace and a supporting beam fit in a peasant building. Alongside this riddle, we may also take a second one with an almost identical image: "A man in the earth, his hair in the wind." This riddle has 121 variants in the collections, and the answers concentrate on describing a turnip or some other root crop. The only answer diverging from this semantically uniform group of answers is "teeth," which is quite obviously wrong and temporarily improvised. The relationship between image and answer is in this riddle as follows: The relationship between the man and his hair = the relationship between a root crop and its tops. These two almost identical riddle images are kept completely separate apart from a few hybrid forms. The analysis is not yet complete unless, in addition to the "man-hair" image we also allow for the adverbial expressions "in the living room" and "in the earth," which have to be taken literally in relation to the answer. This component, the separation of two images, may be thought of as giving the riddlees a clue to the answer.

These two riddles prove that the variation of image and answer is not arbitrary and that it is strictly governed by the semantic scheme. Nor was just any answer fitting the image acceptable; only certain "right" answers recur. When it comes to the answer, variation occurs in the form of either synonymous concepts (for example, a turnip, a turnip in the ground, a turnip growing), or semantic variants (root crops: a turnip, a swede). It seems incredible in the light of these examples that anyone could "guess" the answers (with the exception of "teeth"). In any case, there was little leeway for guessing, and the riddlers knew from their competence and their familiarity with folklore what could be expected. "Guessing" in fact means that the person using riddles sifts through the images and answers in his mind and weighs up their compatibility. Both images and answers are relatively few in number in the riddle genre, so people would have been familiar with them even though they did not immediately recall them.

Therefore, guessing did not, by any means, always lead to the “right,” or acceptable answer. Elli Kōngās-Maranda has described a riddle occasion in which a correct answer was rejected: “I have recorded riddling situations in Malaita where heated discussions followed when a poser did not accept an answer that made sense. It is perhaps a psychological phenomenon worth noting that many riddle posers focus on the answer that they themselves have in mind, and they tend to reject perfectly suitable alternatives.”⁶² This illustrates how two different ways of solving the riddle image may emerge in a riddling situation: the answer proffered by the riddlee is founded on a creative guessing process, whereas the answer expected by the riddler is based on a conventional interpretation of the image that does not tolerate any variation. Sometimes not even the correct answer will satisfy the poser most obviously intent on humiliating the riddlee. I quote from Roger D. Abrahams and Alan Dundes:

“What has four legs, a wagging tail, and barks?” On the face of it, this calls for a flash of triumph from the riddlee, for in the emotionally charged riddling session he is glad to be able to solve one. Therefore, he commonly hastens to answer “A dog”. To which the riddler is then able to say, “Oh, you’ve heard that one,” thereby making a statement about the simple-mindedness of the riddlee.”⁶³

The answer may also be so difficult or even arbitrary that it is impossible to deduce from the image. My research into the nominative absolute formula showed that in the material of 106 riddle types there were twenty-three whose answer could not be recognized by means of the rules for riddling.⁶⁴ The relationship between image and answer may also remain incomprehensible to the user of tradition:

It is a strict rule that riddles must be “right”, i.e., they may not be invented by the riddler himself unless he can invent such a good riddle (in poetic metre) that the others do not realise he made it up himself. Of many riddles, no more is understood than that a certain kind of object is alluded to. For example, the riddle: *Sheep of goose, horn of hair, it’s got a woollen whipsack.—A spider.* is wholly unintelligible to Veteli people. No one can explain why spiders are spoken of thus, but everyone knows what it means, and that is the main thing. In general it is impossible to guess riddles at the first hearing.

In a riddling situation people do not always deliberate very deeply, tending instead to recall an answer they know but have forgotten.⁶⁵ Jack and Phyllis Glazier give an interesting account of an occasion among the Mbeere (Bantu) tribe at which a total of ninety-three riddles were posed. Only forty-seven of them were answered correctly at the first attempt, only nine riddlees attempted a second guess, and only three of their answers were correct. The Glaziers came to the conclusion that “correct answers are not reasoned out through deliberation.” The riddle session proceeds at great speed, because “people acknowledge that, as one riddle participant lamented when she could not answer correctly, ‘Someone who doesn’t know, doesn’t know.’” They concluded that success in riddling depends on hearing riddles and remembering them.⁶⁶

The old riddle literature often underlines the fact that riddles are a battle of wits and aim at developing mental agility; however, field studies in true contexts clearly contradict this claim. For example, in Venda tradition, riddling is not an intellectual exercise. Anyone who does not know the answer to a riddle is not in any way encouraged to find it: “The riddle is a form of knowledge—one learns both its parts as a unit—and a tool of competition.” Learning has a clear objective among, say, the Vendas, for displaying it brings prestige.⁶⁷

But there is no denying that the riddle image always has a certain amount of semantic leeway permitting several answers. In fact, it has been suggested that “each solution can be valid as long as it is offered by a native speaker of the language who shares the cultural experience of the community and has an adequate familiarity with traditional knowledge.”⁶⁸ The hypothesis is both correct and false, depending on the perspective. When a given community begins riddling, it may accept a “wrong” answer as long as no one objects. The numerous unconnected answers given to my example riddle *Tuoppi tehty Tuonelassa, täällä vanteheet valettu* were “right–wrong” answers of precisely this type. It is obvious, however, that traditional knowledge generally imposes limitations on this answering practice. Still, the Edo people in Nigeria did not dare suggest just any answer, for fear of being humiliated; it was better to admit outright that they did not know the answer.⁶⁹

But what is the point of riddling if everyone knows the answer? In most cases this problem was solved by the fact that there were always different people present: there was always someone who had not heard them before. The repertoire of the individual riddler was not necessarily very large, but there were often people present who could offer riddles that had not been heard before. In Finland, the craftsmen traveling from farm to farm, the serving girls, and the farm hands would bring with them the variety needed for riddling tradition to survive. It has also been pointed out that each time a riddle is asked, it is posed as if for the first time.⁷⁰ Despite the rules of the riddling game, there is never any guarantee that the riddlee will know the “right” answer. There is thus always an element of excitement.

The relationship between the riddle image and answer and the guessing involved is in many cultures regulated by similar practices. The conventional relationship between image and answer could be compared to the classical definition given by Ferdinand de Saussure of the linguistic symbol containing two elements: content and expression. In the linguistic symbol the relationship between expression and content is arbitrary, but this does not mean that the expression is dependent on the choice made by the speaker in question; it simply emphasizes the fact that the expression is unmotivated in relation to the content, with which it has no natural relationship.⁷¹ Comparing the riddle to the linguistic symbol, it follows that the relationship between image and answer is interpreted as unmotivated. Normally, however, this is not the case. When a successful riddle is created, the relationship between its image and its answer is strictly regulated by the semantic laws of the genre. The relationship is then furthermore motivated. But when a riddle becomes part of the repertoire repeated by a community, the relationship between its image and answer may shift from the motivated toward an agreed relationship. The answer is then no longer always deduced from the image; it is known beforehand, and only this particular answer is accepted.

Notes

1. Brown and Yule 1983: 35–50.
2. Hakulinen and Ojanen 1976: 84; Hämäläinen 1982: 132–133; Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1988: 50–51.
3. Winograd 1981: 250.
4. Johnson 1975: 142.
5. Burns 1976: 143–145.

6. Bhagwat 1965: 37–38; Abrahams 1983: 272–276.
7. Abrahams 1983: 275.
8. Burns 1976: 143.
9. Abrahams 1983: 276.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 277–295; Evans 1976: 172–181.
12. Abrahams 1983: 275.
13. Evans 1976: 181–184.
14. Ben-Amos 1976: 253–254.
15. Raa 1972: 98.
16. Kuusi 1956: 181–182.
17. Harries 1976.
18. Virtanen 1977: 77–78.
19. Burns 1976: 157.
20. Goldstein 1963: 332.
21. Saarinen 1991: 171–175.
22. Raa 1972: 109.
23. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978: 7–8.
24. Pepicello and Green 1984.
25. Green and Pepicello 1978: 8.
26. Barley 1974: 151.
27. Ben-Amos 1976: 251–252.
28. Green and Pepicello 1978: 5.
29. Hamnett 1967: 387.
30. Barley 1974: 151.
31. Ben-Amos 1976: 251.
32. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1974: 170–182.
33. Saarinen 1991: 37–39.
34. Bascom 1949: 4.
35. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1974: 181.
36. Kuusi 1956: 135.
37. Kuusi 1967; Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1974.
38. Kuusi 1967: 72–87.
39. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1970: 214–224.
40. Ibid., 225–227.
41. Dundes 1962: 36.
42. Taylor 1951.
43. Wossidlo 1897; Hanika-Otto 1930.
44. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978: 75–80.
45. Dundes 1962: 36.
46. Saarinen 1991: 118.
47. Pepicello and Green 1984: 58–59.
48. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978.
49. Ibid., 74.
50. Georges and Dundes 1963; Scott 1976.
51. Glazier and Glazier 1976: 203–204.
52. Haring 1985: 178.
53. Taylor 1951: 349, 450.
54. Petsch 1899: 48.
55. *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* XII, 1: 134, 1934.

56. Haavio 1959.
57. Virtanen 1977: 82.
58. Taylor 1949: 3.
59. Aarne 1917: 3.
60. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1977: 69.
61. Ibid., 25–27.
62. Kögäs-Maranda 1971: 55.
63. Abrahams and Dundes 1972: 140.
64. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978: 106.
65. Hamnett 1967: 384; Haring 1974: 197–198.
66. Glazier and Glazier 1976: 209.
67. Haring 1974: 202.
68. Ben-Amos 1976: 249.
69. Ibid., 250.
70. Harries 1976: 319.
71. de Saussure 1970: 96–97.

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3

Traps of Trans-formation: Theoretical Convergences between Riddle and Ritual

DON HANDELMAN

Explaining the enigmatic character of riddles is a central challenge in the study of these phenomena.¹ These discussions are dominated by linguistically based analyses and literary interpretations. The former often address rules of language whereby spoken or written enigmas are generated and resolved. The latter discuss the role of such enigmas in various narrative forms. Both perspectives also address corpora of riddles as forms and enactments of culture: as contextualized by culture and in turn as giving meaning to certain cultural productions (i.e. tales, epics, expressive performances, and so forth). Nonetheless, these emphases on linguistic production and on the dependency of meaning on context have excluded the following: the likelihood that the structure of (some) riddles may have that which I will call a high degree of modular autonomy and self-referentiality, and a low degree of indexicality. These attributes give to riddles an unusual effect in relation to social context, one that hypothetically is more formative or determining of context. In turn, this perspective gives to riddle a distinctive epistemological status: this emphasizes the causality built into the structure of riddles and the effects that this structure has on contexts within which it is embedded. Furthermore, the enigmatic character of riddles may then be related, in part, to their interior processuality.

My interest in this conceptualization of riddles was aroused by ethnographic reports, here and there, that riddling and riddle contests are sometimes embedded in rituals in various parts of the world. In the main, these ritual occasions are of the kind that makes “trans-formation” take place through the course of the ritual itself. In other words, such rituals are put together as causal structures, to do cause-and-effect that is deliberately intended to make some degree of change in the world outside of the ritual. Such ritual has a different epistemological status from other occasions commonly called “ritual” (or equivalent terms) that are not organized as causal structures. (The argument for this type of ritual is developed elsewhere.²) During our group’s discussions on structures of riddles, I began to see certain analogies between my conceptualization of the logic of the ritual of trans-formation and that of, at least, certain riddles. These convergences may seem far-fetched at first thought, given the

vast differences of scale, complexity, and intentionality between these structures. Yet it is intriguing that riddles are located sometimes within rituals of trans-formation. This should encourage thought on whether there is resonance among structures of ritual and riddle. Such resonance would point to degrees of functional equivalence among these utterly disparate phenomena, and perhaps also to more understanding of both, especially with regard to the embedment of riddles within rituals of trans-formation.

These are the sorts of comparisons that I will pursue here. My arguments must be theoretical and hypothetical, for I do not have a corpus that includes both riddles that appear within rituals and descriptions of the rituals themselves. However, the entire subject is barely broached in the voluminous literature on both riddles and rituals, and this is sufficient justification for outlining a theoretical approach that relates the two.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first section outlines schematically the basic features of the ritual of trans-formation. The second discusses attributes of the structure of riddles, and whether they parallel features of the ritual of trans-formation. In a preliminary way, the third suggests how riddles compare to other enigmatic phenomena—play and game—that also appear in rituals of trans-formation; and so why riddles may be located within such ritual. The chapter concludes with some partial thoughts on why riddle form is necessarily constituted as enigmatic.

The Structure of the Ritual of Trans-formation

The ritual of trans-formation³ is characterized by the following features. It is organized as a microcosm of aspects of the world that are brought into extraordinary relationships within the ritual. Such ritual is then a simplified but specialized, closed system that operates in parallel to the everyday world. While this microcosm is working, it sustains a comparatively high degree of autonomy from contexts of the everyday world, for the following reasons. As long as the microcosm has a mandate to function, it does so in accordance with the in-built relationships among its own rules. And, although from the point of view of an external observer the microcosm is only a version or part of the ongoing world, from within itself the microcosm fills the world of its participants. It becomes that world by transcending its own partiality as a version of the world. It does so because the makers of such a ritual postulate it as a microcosm of the whole. The microcosm, the part, behaves as if it were the whole, the world. In other terms, although the microcosm is created from the wider world, and eventually returns to it, during its relatively autonomous existence such ritual is less indexical of—and is less responsive in any continuous way—to the wider world. Instead, the microcosm tends to a high degree of self-referentiality. This is integral to its relative autonomy from the wider world. Rituals organized in this way are, in Pierre Smith's words, "snares for thought"—snares of mind and sense that trap participants in the logic of processes of trans-formation.⁴

A second attribute of such ritual is that it is purposive, in a quite instrumental sense. Take, for example, a rite of passage that turns an immature boy into a mature man.⁵ In emic, culturally specific terms, this process can be restated as follows: there

is a structure of intentionality built into the ritual, such that its doing actually turns a boy into a man. This is the explicit, cultural purpose of the rite.⁶ The ritual specifies its own goals and includes them in its structure. In technical language, it is “teleological”: the goal of organized action is integral to that very activity itself.

Third, a ritual of trans-formation is a deliberate maker of change that is neither haphazard nor aimless. The change it makes has particular and specified directions whose outcome will have a deliberate effect on the world. The making of maturation, for example, effects not only that particular being but also an elementary change in the wider world of beings. The purposiveness of such an event is anticipatory: it previews the hypothetical, future condition that will be brought into being, and it provides procedures that will actualize this act of imagination. A ritual of transformation deterministically projects its own future. Since this future condition does not exist as yet, such ritual must have predictive capabilities. Put otherwise, such a ritual contains its own future within itself. In turn, this requires that the ritual have a stipulated control over processes of causality—of how a certain future or outcome will be determined. The man that is to be produced out of the boy is not replaceable by some alternative product. Processes of causality cannot be probabilistic—they must be deterministic.⁷ Alternatively, the ritual structure may have the capacity to self-correct if processes of change begin to deviate from the predicted outcome. In this instance the ritual has some degree of self-steering properties.

A causal structure must have degrees of autonomy from the immediate context of its embedment in the everyday world, if the product or output of this causal structure is to have any stipulated impact on that world. The continuing emphasis by scholars on the dependency on context of all kinds of ritual will utterly obscure this point. A relative autonomy from context points then to how the causal structure of a ritual of trans-formation is necessarily processual, in ways that do not have to accord with commonsense notions of cause-and-effect. And, that the processual structure of ritual will also be one of temporality, since conditions of “before” and “after” will gauge the stipulated progression of the occasion.

At this juncture my reference to “context” needs clarification. There are two elementary notions of context used by scholars at present. The most common scholarly usage of context, crudely put, makes it akin to a container—of culture, of historical formation, of social situation—that may be filled with varieties of content. These contents are the agents, agencies, and forms of social life. The contours of the container shape the structurings and associated meanings of the container’s contents. The actions and activities of social life then are said to be context-sensitive or context-dependent. This produces statements like “in such-and-such a context,” “the context of such-and-such is such-and-such,” and so forth.

Contextualization—the impact of the container on its contents—is used either in the weaker sense of background or in the stronger sense of foreground. In either instance this usage of context does not usually acknowledge how social, and indeed human, existence is woven together in complex wholes. This is so because this usage of context artificially splits being (the container) from doing (the contents of the container). When I say that the ritual of trans-formation (and certain kinds of riddles) are relatively autonomous of context and therefore able to act on this,⁸ I am referring to the above usage of context as a container-like property of social life into which

contents are spilled and held—therefore context is partitioned from its contents. It is the explicit or implicit partitioning of context from other structures of social life that enables me to say that the latter (in the form of certain kinds of ritual) can be made to turn about and to act on context. Of greater importance is the fact that not a few creators and practitioners of rituals of trans-formation often make (albeit in other terms) this kind of separation between context and its contents, thereby enabling them to posit such rituals as relatively autonomous microcosms that turn about to act on the world. In this regard, the ritual of trans-formation is created by its makers as an artifice of culture that is postulated as momentarily distinct from ongoing social life, in order to act on the latter.

In contrast to the formulation of context just outlined, there is the Batesonian conception of context.⁹ This can be described as the weave of relatedness of all there is as what there is, during any moment. This conception of context is necessarily holistic (all there is) yet is always changing, since “what there is” shifts continually during time. Here, being and doing are inseparable. In this essay I am not using this conception of context despite its more subtle, comprehensive, and systemic scope, since it is much more complex and would require a separate work to explicate its epistemology.

To return to the characteristics of the ritual of trans-formation, of especial importance is its fifth feature—that this kind of ritual contains incompatible or contradictory states of existence, that in the course of its working must be synthesized, or otherwise solved. In this regard, for example, the categories of “boy” and “man” are opposed at the same level of abstraction, and therefore should not coexist within the same person, the same social space, or through the same duration. One is acceptably either “boy” or “man,” and not some paradoxical hybrid combination of the two categories—yet this would result if the category of “boy” were forced into that of “man,” without recourse to a higher level of abstraction that subsumed both categories. With this recourse, one category can be trans-formed into the other, through higher-order premises, often paranormal, that encompass both the categories and the extraordinary relationship that is established between them.¹⁰

Sixth, this problem of categorical trans-formation may be thought of in terms of boundariness. Within the ritual of trans-formation, the boundary between categories must be breached in order to move and to remake the substance of one category into the other, without creating a paradoxical product as the final outcome. As noted, the relationship that is established between categories is a causal one, and deterministically so, permitting only a highly circumscribed range of outcomes.¹¹

Seventh, to round out this skeletal sketch of the ritual of trans-formation, the breaching of boundaries may well depend on the introduction of uncertainty into the viability of the categories that the boundary separates and maintains. If the phenomenal viability of the category of “boy” is made uncertain, then this weakens the boundary that separates it from the category of “man.” In effect, this puts a question mark next to the phenomenon of “boy” in the context of a ritual of trans-formation. This is equivalent to asking the question of whether the “boy” will continue to remain a boy. Since the answer is negative, this enables the special relationship that will relate the boy to a man. The ritual of trans-formation may be thought of as a sequence of question and answer, through which the question determines the answer.¹²

Note that I have made no mention of “meaning” (the use of the boy / man distinction is arbitrary, and trans-formations among numerous other categories would do just as well). Current thinking in anthropology (and concurrently, in folkloristics) emphasizes that the significance of “ritual” (and associated conceptions) lies primarily in its affective meaning for participants, while meaning is necessarily dependent on the contextualization of ritual.¹³ Then “ritual” has little significance apart from its meaning(s), and so too meaning lacks significance apart from the contexts of its production. Consequently, in these views, there are no abstractions that may usefully be called “ritual,” in transcultural terms.

This position does make sense for the invention or creation of ritual, since it can emerge only from particular cultural grounds. However, my position is that if “rituals” are created and used as causal structures, then they may have certain commonalities with other causal structures, across cultures. As I commented at the outset, the structural impulsions of causality will be obscured if one looks only to context and meaning for the significance of ritual form. The dependency of meaning on context makes better sense when one understands that, if a causal structure is imbued with degrees of autonomous impulsion, then its outcomes will have a particular epistemological relationship to the contexts within which this structure is embedded. This relationship to context will differ from those of structures that are put together according to logics other than that of trans-formation.¹⁴

It is in like terms that I want to discuss the structure of riddles, by arguing the following points: that riddle form is relatively autonomous from everyday context; that riddle is constituted as a causal structure; that this causal structure is characterized by self-referentiality, by a paradoxical internal boundary, and by a relationship of whole to part, that is also one of levels of abstraction; and that the causal structure of riddle form may be either probabilistic or deterministic, accordingly with differing consequences.

The Structure of Riddle

Like the ritual of trans-formation, the relationships established within riddles are always out of the ordinary in relation to those of the everyday world. To make use of a simple example, in the riddle “[What is] a house with no door,” the relationship between the riddle image (a house with no door) and the answer is one that likely has currency only within the terms of reference of the riddle. As Köngäs-Maranda argues, the metaphoric relationships established by riddles are “conditional” and “the riddle image states the condition under which the metaphor holds true.”¹⁵ The riddle is a temporary setup that simulates and establishes the validity of an extraordinary relationship. Yet from within the terms of reference of the riddle, this hypothetical relationship has an entirety of being in and of itself. The elements of this strange but viable holism generally are known in the everyday, but the extraordinary relationship between them is not. Therefore the riddle cannot be comprehended merely as an affective reflection or expression of the everyday world. Instead, the viability of the riddle depends on its relative autonomy from the everyday world of cognitive categories and the usual relationships among them. I will return to this point.

Köngäs-Maranda maintains that “the riddle image is always conceptually a question, be it syntactically interrogative or not.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, contrary to the tendencies of other scholars either to analyze only the riddle image or to analyze it in isolation from the answer, Köngäs-Maranda insists that the riddle whole demands the discussion of both question and answer.¹⁷ There she conceptualizes the riddle image as “a question which contains the answer.”¹⁸ This position is supported by other scholars of riddles. For example, Ragnar Johnson insists that a riddle consists of a question and an answer,¹⁹ and Green and Pepicello comment that “riddles do not exist as unanswered questions.”²⁰ (See also Blacking, on Venda riddles.²¹)

That riddle is constituted of question and answer may be obvious, but it is most relevant to the comparison of riddle to ritual of trans-formation—since the question/answer set is likely to be an elementary structure of causation. This requires some discussion. Scholars who study sequencing in conversation have argued that in standard American English, question/answer constitutes an “adjacency pair” sequence.²² In this, the utterance of the question is a “summons” that insists on the utterance of an answer.²³ According to Green and Pepicello, “the tensions generated by the lack of closure in unanswered questions” makes the unanswered riddle intolerable.²⁴ In standard American English, the question/answer interaction may be the simplest social unit that is organized as a causal sequence.²⁵ If there is transcultural cachet to this point, then one can argue that the riddle image impels an answer. In slightly different terms, the posing of the riddle image virtually causes an answer to happen and points to the structure of the riddle as one of cause and effect. That is, the causality that the “question” implies virtually traps the protagonist into the requirement of an answer. Like the ritual of trans-formation, the riddle is a snare for thought. The riddle structure is one of intentionality—it is purposive in its thrust toward the accomplishment and actualization of an answer.²⁶ And this is a hallmark of the ritual of trans-formation.

This structure of riddles is discernible only if actual riddles are decontextualized, so that (initially, at least) the context and style of their enactment is not given pride of place in discussion. But the structure of causation of the riddle obviously is neither clear-cut nor straightforward: the riddle image is constituted as a puzzle (i.e., a house with no door)—one that, as noted, demands the creation of an extraordinary relationship. The structure of riddles not only takes one elsewhere but also leads one there, in a planned, if brief and enigmatic, journey to elsewhere. This is at the heart of that which a riddle can accomplish as trans-formation (and therefore why it may be situated within rituals of trans-formation).

The answer to the riddle image both leads elsewhere (the unusual relationship) and returns to the question in the image. In this regard, the structure of the riddle is recursive, a structure that contains feedback: the answer satisfies and completes the conditions of the riddle image, while this imaging of the riddle is teleological (like the ritual of trans-formation).²⁷ The riddle image is an interrogative that contains its own goal, the answer to the puzzle of the riddle image. Once more, according to Köngäs-Maranda, “the riddle image is a question which contains the answer.”²⁸ As such it is also “autotelic,”²⁹ containing not only its own goal but also its own source of motivation, the question-answer format.

The answer to the riddle image of “a house with no door” may be an “egg.” Although the image of “house” leads elsewhere, to “egg,” given the riddle imaging of “house,” the answer of “egg” also leads back to “house,” since both “house” and “egg” may be perceived as containers (perhaps as intended for living tissue). The answer completes the question, and totally, thereby closing off question/answer as a whole—a self-contained structural unit in its entirety. The riddle, as a whole, is characterized by a high degree of self-referentiality, and Ragnar Johnson comments that “the riddle can be structurally analyzed into semantically self-referential logical propositions.”³⁰ As A. K. Ramanujan has put it in our discussions, riddles are not indexical, for their structures are directed to answers and not to meaning. Consequently, and consequentially, riddles are less bound to context. In their relative autonomy from context, riddles are concerned primarily with the accomplishment of effect (i.e., answers) rather than affect (i.e., meaning). As noted, this gives to riddles the structural capacity to act on context rather than to be virtually conditioned by it. This, too, is a most prominent feature of a ritual of transformation.

The structure of riddles leads one elsewhere in a directed progression that is also a transformation. Just as the structure of riddles is a causal one, so, too, it is processual. More than this: processuality is inherent to riddle structure. This aspect of riddle (and therefore, also its potential social and cognitive effects) may be overlooked easily, especially if the analytical perspective is wholly structural or linguistic.

A riddle, to be a riddle, must move one from “here” to “there,” as it were. Depending on cultural conventions and understandings of riddle, “there” may be something, someone, or somewhere, to be deduced, guessed, or known in advance. There are two aspects of this process that are especially interesting: first, by definition any riddle presents this movement as puzzling and problematic; second, once the answer is available, it becomes clear that one kind of category (whether of thing, or of being) has been turned into another, with which the former has no usual association, through the riddle process.

Abrahams approaches the kind of formulation I am essaying here when he comments that the riddle “establishes a little internal conflict of its own . . . and then provides its own solution.”³¹ However, he enters no further into the trap of the riddle, and thereby misses its implications of transformation. Thus, on the one hand, a riddle is an interrogative, causally impelling one towards an answer, a solution; on the other hand, the puzzle of the riddle image (that which is commonly called the “block”) seemingly stops progress towards an answer. Therefore, in terms of its question (the riddle image), the riddle is predicated on self-contradiction (a house with no door).

This self-contradiction seems of the sort that characterizes the logical paradox that consistently confuses categories (or Logical Types, in the Russellian variety of paradox). So, (a) a house contains a door (and usually a window); (b) a house without a door (or a window) is not a house; but (c) the riddle image insists on a house without a door (or window). This is a house that cannot be a house: it is not a member of the category of “house.” Then what is it? As long as no solution is found, the problem remains impenetrable, the protagonist trapped in the riddle, for the sequence of logical progression remains utterly circular, but wholly within the initial segment of the riddle, without generating any new information that would create aperture and

exit from its infinite regress. Thus the sequence of logical progression for this riddle image would be something of the following order: it is a house—but it cannot be a house—it is a house . . . but . . . etc. In fact, the paradox utterly blocks the causal structure—the question impelling toward an answer—of a riddle. As long as the paradox operates, it makes movement self-referential, but solely in the mode of infinite regress. That is, movement is restricted wholly to the domain from within which the riddle image sets forth.

Two points follow: first, the “block” is like a boundary—one constituted through paradox and located between the domain or category of the riddle image and another; second, the solution to the paradox (thereby making of it an unviable paradox) must necessarily be trans-formative, since it will breach this boundary to connect domains, categories, or levels.

That a riddle contains within its interior a boundary that seems impenetrable immediately implies that there is another domain beyond the boundary, one made inaccessible by this boundary. Nonetheless, as interrogatives, riddle images insist that these other domains are also parts of the same riddle structures. (Similarly, the category of “boy” implicates the existence elsewhere of that of “man”—although only certain forms, like a ritual of trans-formation, will insist that both categories are causally related within a single modular structure). One conceptualization of boundary is that the latter gives shape, coherence, and integrity to whatever is subsumed within the category created by the boundary. The riddle structure insists that it contains at least two unlike, incompatible, or contradictory categories or levels that are separated from one another by a boundary, one often constituted through paradox. On the other hand, the riddle structure insists that there must be ways to solve the paradox, to penetrate the boundary, and so to create an extraordinary relationship between those categories or levels. Now, it is also clear that these relationships are simulations: they have their logical validity especially (and sometimes, only) within the structure of riddle. A house is not like an egg, at least in the usual discourse of standard American English. That it can be made so again says something about the relative autonomy of riddle structures from context, and so opens the question of the relationships of such specialized structures to the contexts of their presence.

To this point I have argued that many riddles are constituted as autonomous processual structures. These structures are composed of at least two unlike categories or levels whose adjacent presence is (in the main) a deliberate function of the simulation or artifice of riddle structure, and that these two are kept separate by a boundary that often is paradoxical. Moreover, the validity of the boundary as paradox holds only so long as the second category or level is hidden from the view of the first. As noted here, this would be the usual condition of these categories or levels, since ordinarily they would be neither adjacent nor related to one another. Yet in riddles they are made adjacent. Moreover, riddles are designed culturally as simple causal structures, to do the act of temporarily penetrating the idea of boundary. This penetration creates unusual relationships between categories or levels, the validity of which is usually limited to the riddle structure itself. These relationships are transformations through which one thing or being is made over into the image of another. The medium of such trans-formations seems most commonly to be metaphor.

In modern Western cultural thought, metaphor is not perceived as a process of causality. Affectively, a house may be likened to an egg, but this will not turn house into egg, except in as-if worlds of legend, fairy tale, and play. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that in many traditional societies, whether these are relatively "simple" or highly "complex" in organization, the creation of metaphor and analogy under special conditions (i.e., of rituals of transformation) is perceived as the most common of effective, causal mechanisms. Thus, hypothetically, a house can be turned into an egg (for example, an embryo), such that operations on that egg will have effects on that house. As I noted for rituals of transformation, the trans-forming of one category (i.e., boy) into another (i.e., man) depends on the temporary dissolution of the boundary between these two categories. This often seems not to proceed directly, but through a shift in level that enables the categories to be related to one another, under a common, more abstract rubric. This problem is addressed most directly to riddles in a paper by Michael Lieber.³² However, if riddles have the structural and processual properties I have attributed to them, then their affinities to ritual contexts are neither accidental nor incidental.

Not solving the riddle, not dissolving or penetrating the boundary between categories, tells us something about the trans-formative processuality of riddle structures. In turn, this raises the issue of whole/part relationships in riddles, as well as whether such structures are probabilistic or deterministic in their outcomes and solutions.

Let me indicate what I think are the consequences of not penetrating the boundary between categories, and what this failure may say about the constitution of such boundaries—the "blocks"—within riddles. Leea Virtanen³³ and Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj³⁴ bring an important example of the consequences of failure in Finnish riddling contests that, to my mind, indicates why the boundary within riddle should be understood as paradoxical—if it is not breached and the riddle solved.

These contests are usually held during winter twilights. Those who fail to answer the riddles are "dressed in crazy fashion: a large coat, a fur inside out, big boots," and are banished in punishment to Hymylä, the Land of Smiles, "where neither sun nor moon shine." Hymylä is "a fantastic and imaginary topsyturvy land where all the normal functions . . . are upside down and inside out." Although this is done in fun, there is also a degree of fear in being sent there, and the victim is made to look ridiculous in the eyes of others.³⁵ I would argue that Hymylä signifies the deconstruction of the social person, one who has failed at transformation by not penetrating the interior boundary of the riddle. In Hymylä, humans are made into natural or animal beings: a little boy drinks gruel from a dish on the floor, the victim is told to wash in a slop bucket and to dry on a horse blanket, and so forth.

Hymylä, I would argue further, is itself a dilated representation of the paradoxical logic of boundary within riddle, one within which the victim has become trapped. Here transformation has not succeeded, and the processual structure of riddle is caught betwixt and between, stymied in the paradoxical mazes that constitute the boundary or block within the riddle structure. One fails the riddle by failing to solve the paradox of its interior boundary. Then this paradoxical world expands to entrap its victim. Hymylä is a dramatic enactment of the internal logic of the incomplete

riddle, one that is stopped in its own interior boundary. These are the consequences of failure to do trans-formations, and so to connect usually unrelated categories. The riddle usually is explained to the victim in Hymylä³⁶—the trap released in the heart of its own paradoxical world. Then the way out for the victim lies in starting the riddle over from the beginning, and getting the linear progression—the answer—right. The Finnish example shows that the only way out of the paradox of trans-formation is to do the trans-formation correctly. The alternative is to be trapped in the entropic world of infinite regress.³⁷

If the boundary within the riddle is initially constituted as paradoxical, then the solution to the riddle should also involve a shift in levels, apart from a new connection between unrelated categories. This point necessarily relates the structure of riddle to part/whole relationships. I think it possible to argue that the boundary within the riddle will be constituted as paradoxical only if the self-contradictory riddle image (i.e., a house without apertures) communicates the instruction to relate to itself as a whole whose parts are consistent with one another. The interrogative “[What is] a house without doors?” communicates a self-contradiction in the phenomenon of “house,” but it insists that there is some phenomenon in relation to which a house without apertures will not be self-contradictory. It is the interrogative format of the riddle image that signifies an insufficiency of information, and therefore that paradox cannot be related to as an end in itself. In other words, the riddle image insists that it is a whole that as yet is incomplete. The relationship of the riddle image to the entire, but as yet unrevealed riddle, is that of synecdoche. The riddle image is a part that signifies the as yet unrevealed whole. This whole is then the metaphor that relates the house without apertures to an egg, and so completes the total microworld of the riddle. Then this relationship is that whole which subsumes and connects its disparate parts (house, egg).

The shift in levels is the emergence of the relationship between parts—it is in this way that the whole hinted at in the riddle image is completed. The whole (that is also the movement from “here” to “there”) constitutes a level higher than its categorical parts. Such wholes exist through the relationship(s) established among their parts. Therefore the paradoxical, self-contradictory boundary within the riddle disappears, since the relationship that constitutes the whole is shown as self-consistent. This is so, because this relationship regulates the connection among its parts without contradiction. The house without apertures is no longer self-contradictory, but is consistent with an egg. Note that this is not a matter of whether the category of house, or that of egg, signify a higher level of abstraction; it is the relationship established between these categories that constitutes the higher level. In other words, the higher level is “the whole of the riddle” that governs the creation of relationships between categories that ordinarily maintain their separateness. In my view, the holism of riddle structure is a necessary condition for conjoining unrelated categories and for establishing the processual relationship between them. Only in this way does the whole subsume, and so control, its parts. Similarly, the effects of trans-formation of one part or category into another (i.e., house into egg) are best controlled when the riddle structure maintains relative autonomy from context. Thus, my contention is that, depending on how it is inserted into context (whether into narrative, text, or social

interaction), a riddle structure either can be made to do something to that context or is a mere diversion.

But this argument on the relationship between riddle and context depends greatly on cultural premises that substantiate the riddle process. I have not argued that riddles are structures that are autonomous of cultures, but, rather, that some riddles (like those rituals I call “trans-formative”) have an unusual relationship to context. Nonetheless, the reason this may be so likely lies in the ways the trans-formative processes of riddle structures are culturally conceived. Here I accept the simple but useful distinction (that has featured in the discussions of our group) between (a) the riddle for which an appropriate answer (or answers) can be worked out from the information in the riddle image and (b) the riddle to which there can be only the one answer, one that cannot be worked out from the riddle image, but that must be known in advance. This distinction seems broadly to be a cultural one, and is important for my contention that some riddles are causal structures, minimally defined.

Western scholarship seems to insist that answers to riddles can be worked out from their riddle images, and that if there is only one correct answer to a riddle, it is a matter of convention. In this view, just as a whole can be induced from its parts, so, too, the right answer to a riddle can be guessed. Dan Ben-Amos’s position likely is representative of the thrust of Western scholarship that argues for multiple solutions to riddles. Thus, “a sequence of answers is a speculative attempt by native speakers to examine all the possibilities conceivable of correlating referents to metaphors or puzzles.”³⁸ In a similar vein, Ben-Amos concludes that “an answer to a riddle . . . does not express its only solution. . . . Rather the riddle meaning is an abstract concept of all the possible solutions which a single metaphor has the capacity to symbolize in a particular culture.”³⁹ On the other hand, some scholars of Indian riddles argue that the answer must be known in advance of the question. This is V. Narayana Rao’s position, as he expounded it to us with regard to Telugu riddles. This view may also hold to a degree for the *euaggelion* of the ancient gnostic world, “a good news riddle, which if solved will reveal the immanent but hidden presence of a savior principle within the world.”⁴⁰

Both perspectives are consonant with my position that some riddles are causal structures. But in the first causation is probabilistic, while in the second (as is the case in a ritual of trans-formation) it is deterministic. The second gives greater power to the implications of causal structure, for there its processes are much more directed, overdetermined, and teleological. Thus, if the answer must be known in advance of the question, the whole undoubtedly determines the question, the part, from the outset, and the entire riddle process is determinative of a particular outcome or effect, even if the participants are unaware of this. This may be the case in the Zen koan, where the master knows both the answer and how to get there, while the disciple eventually will learn the correct answer only when he gets to his destination by the right path.⁴¹

The determined riddle projects a semiotic sign that either hides its own signifier or pretends its own signifier is the signified. Thus on the surface of the riddle, the question is the signifier, the answer the signified. But then the answer is revealed as the signifier, the question as the signified. The revelation is that of the whole rela-

tionship, from which the question is seen to derive. In such a riddle, the whole is hidden but immanent, awaiting revelation, and it surfaces with the answer that both precedes (implicitly) and concludes (explicitly) the riddle. This sort of riddle is undoubtedly teleological in its organization, since the answer precedes the question, and therefore contains the route to the latter.

As noted, the notion that riddles are solvable by (ruled) guesswork is pervasive in Western scholarly thought on these puzzles. This probabilistic view of the riddle process is taken furthest by Köngäs-Maranda's argument that Malaitan riddles question the established order of things, and have become vehicles through which to discuss social change.⁴² In contrast to the determined riddle, this approach to riddle solutions has something in common with Western perceptions of how games (especially games of chance) produce outcomes. And the outcomes of games are thought to be best analyzed through probability theory rather than in terms of any deterministic properties. Although I do not know of any direct applications of probability theory to riddle solutions, the analogy between riddle and game has frequently been made.

In this regard, it is interesting that Ian Hacking, in his seminal work on the emergence of probability theory in seventeenth-century Europe, takes the *Mahabharata* story of Nala as evidence that the ancient Indians were aware of the role of probabilistic inference in gaming.⁴³ Nala lost all at dicing. Years later, in Hacking's reading of this story, Nala watched his employer use mathematical skill to estimate exactly the number of leaves and fruit on two great tree branches. Nala was taught this "science" of mathematical inference and recouped all through success at dicing. This is a typically Western, probabilistic reading of Indian dice games and other contests.

In his discussion of the Nala story, David Shulman indicated the likelihood that the outcomes of such contests were determined from the outset.⁴⁴ And Narayana Rao argued, in discussion, that Nala was taught "perfect knowledge," rather than probabilistic inference. That is, "perfect knowledge" could only be a property of total knowledge of the whole, that therefore determined all knowledge of its parts.⁴⁵ Hacking, on the other hand, is insisting that knowledge of the whole can be inferred from a part (i.e., knowledge of the leaves on two branches can be inferred from a sample, the number of leaves on a single twig), in keeping with modern Western perspectives. These viewpoints parallel that of the riddle solution as probabilistic, inferrable, and therefore guessable; and that of having to know the answer beforehand, and therefore of the solution as determined. Moreover, these viewpoints then would attribute quite different significances to the idea of riddle (or game) as a small-scale causal structure, and to its possible roles within rituals of transformation, whose outcomes must be determined from the outset. In general, however, A. K. Ramanujan's point (made to us in discussion) that riddles make (or express) the passage from conditions of ambiguity to disambiguation, serves as a useful starting point for the presence of riddles in rituals.

Convergences between Riddle and Ritual

Although I have not done an extensive search for cases of riddles in rituals, my impression is that examples are scanty, their ethnographic reportage bare. Here I merely

cite some of these and note that the subject deserves substantial inquiry. V. Narayana Rao has commented in our discussions that riddles feature in Telugu rituals of marriage, death, and the choice of a monarch. Hamnett mentions that riddles fall within ritual contexts among some African peoples.⁴⁶ Köngäs-Maranda⁴⁷ states that riddles are associated with marriage.⁴⁸ Among Tagalog, in the Philippines, riddles are practiced at baptisms and wakes;⁴⁹ while Abrahams discusses riddles during wakes on St. Vincent, in the Caribbean.⁵⁰ Williams states that among the Dusan peoples of Borneo, a turn to riddling could substitute for physical violence between men.⁵¹ Riddles with predictive capacities written on lanterns feature during Chinese New Year celebrations.⁵² As well, the Jewish Passover ritual meal has riddle-like elements.⁵³ For that matter, the Zen koan may be understood as the centerpiece of a ritual of very lengthy duration that is intended to accomplish self-transformation and transcendence.⁵⁴ Of especial interest here is Ramanujan's reporting of two versions of a riddle tale collected by Suzanne Hanchett in Karnataka. In one version, the protagonist fails to solve the riddle and must die. But the second "offers a socially acceptable solution to the riddle, a marriage,"⁵⁵ and it is the second version that is told during a women's ritual, done to ensure fertility within marriage, among other goals.

Among the Iroquois peoples, the Midwinter rites of renewal, the entering of the new year, were (and in places apparently are) effected in part through "dream guessing." The dreams of persons were represented as riddles that had to be guessed correctly by assembled members of the community. So, too, the dreams of the Creator and of culture heroes, again represented as riddles, had to be guessed correctly. Once a riddle was guessed, the community took on the moral obligation to satisfy the desires expressed in the dream that the riddle represented. On this depended the essential harmony among person, community, and the paranatural. Also in rituals of healing, the sick person represented his or her dreams in riddle form that had to be guessed correctly and satisfied. Moreover, the content of dreams made explicit through the solving of riddles could become the basis for new ritual forms.⁵⁶ Guessing these riddled dreams forced members of the community to reveal publicly the hidden, conflicting desires of others of their number in various domains of living and on different levels of cosmos, to make these desires public knowledge, and to erase these discordancies—metaphysical, psychosocial—so that people, community, and cosmos resonated harmoniously with one another as they moved into the new year.

In all of the above, there are the bare lineaments of pattern. When riddles are present in rituals, the latter tend to be associated with transitions. Moreover, these riddles tend to have only one correct answer, just as the rituals they are associated with have only one correct outcome. In my terms, rituals of transformation are necessarily engaged in the work of transition, but not all rituals concerned with transition are trans-formative. Nonetheless, riddles, rituals associated with transition, and rituals of transformation have one essential point in common—that which Ramanujan calls disambiguation, the clarification of ambiguous contexts. But of further concern here is that rituals of transformation intentionally make change take place within phenomena, and the particular outcome of change must be determined from the outset. In other words, such rituals do not merely express or comment on transitions—their logic is to make transition happen. I have outlined the affinities between deterministic riddles (that seem to have only one answer or a limited set of answers) and

rituals of trans-formation, including their causal structure, their modularity, and their relative autonomy from context—and consequently their capacities to do something to context. Now I will add that in terms of their internal logic of operation, these deterministic riddles are virtual, albeit simple, analogues of rituals of trans-formation.

Yet what are riddles doing in such rituals? Does the processual structure of riddle suggest that it may have quite honed operations to accomplish in relation to such ritual? Are these functions primarily effective (i.e., helping to make change happen) or affective (i.e., giving expression to change that is being done via other media)?⁵⁷

My proposition is the following: if there are riddles that can have only one answer, which cannot be deciphered with certainty from the riddle image, and therefore which must be known in advance of the riddle question, then this sort of riddle will be implicated in the making of change. However, on the basis of available information, one cannot insist that change is somehow done through riddle when the latter is present in a ritual of trans-formation. One would need detailed ethnographies that specified the location of riddling in the sequencing of ritual, who did the riddling, whether it took the form of contest, what the appropriate responses were, and so forth.

Nonetheless, in the most general of terms, the following hypothetical operations of such riddles could be considered in future work on rituals of trans-formation. First, riddles may have performative, rehearsal functions, socializing their users into the logics of trans-formation that also inform certain rituals. Second, related to this, such riddles simulate the turning of paradox (and its functions of boundary maintenance) into more linear relationships of cause and effect. Third, within ritual, such riddles may act on participants as experiential, reflexive devices, either to remind them of processes at work elsewhere in a particular phase of the ritual sequence or to condense in simple form the infinitely more complex processes at work throughout the ritual sequence.

THE CHANGES THAT ARE MADE to take place in rituals of trans-formation are clearly cumulative and directional in their effects. But, as David Shulman pointed out in our discussions, riddles in and of themselves seem to have no cumulative effects. For example, one can simply return to the beginning, and do the riddle over again. Therefore, fourth, the riddle may signify the closure of the accumulation of effect in rituals of trans-formation. The riddle may operate as a device of negative feedback, indicating when and where in ritual process the work of trans-formation should be slowed down, switched into a different mode, or ended. This possibility is supported by the evidence that so many riddle images are evocatively expansive in their intimation, while the solutions to these riddles often are radical reductions and diminutions of this. In this way, riddling may signify the exhaustion of trans-formation and a way out of its processes. In this way, too, riddles might be said to have an active role in making the processes of ritual actually produce their effects. But, again, this must be examined through the actual presence of riddles in actual ritual designs.

What of riddles whose riddle images generate multiple answers that satisfy the criteria of the latter, where alternative solutions are acceptable, and so where the answer need not be known in advance of the question? Given the openness of their horizons, my guess is that such riddles have little to do with the determinism of

outcome that is a hallmark of rituals of transformations. However, as Lieber⁵⁸ suggests, the operations of these riddles may be related more to the exploration of cultural order.

The unusual role of riddles in rituals of transformation can be highlighted by brief contrasts with two other media—free-play and game—that on occasion also are implicated in the making or indexing of change in such ritual. For present purposes, the idea of free-play can be summarized schematically in terms of the following attributes⁵⁹. First, play is dependent on make-believe and on its conditional truth values. Second, play enigmatically changes the known signs of form into something else, by altering the reified boundaries that define categorical distinctions. Third, any phenomenal form can be transformed through a playful imagination. Fourth, free-play brings into being something that had not existed beforehand, by changing the boundaries that categorize phenomena, thereby altering the meaning of the latter. Creation, destruction, and recreation of phenomena occur because those boundaries that demarcate the viability and coherency of phenomena are altered. Fifth, free-play is an amoral medium marked by plasticity, lability, and flexibility in ideation. These qualities have the potential to disturb any form of stability, any conception of order. Therefore free-play questions the phenomenal stability and propositional truth of any form.

Free-play introduces uncertainty into propositional truth, questioning its validity. In other words, free-play is an agent through which the validity of categorization is taken apart, thereby opening the way to its reconstitution as something else. Varieties of play are relatively common in rituals of transformation, and my supposition is that in these rituals, play helps break down the propositional validity of that phenomenon which is to be reconstituted as something else. However, the fluidity of play is continually unstable, and therefore in terms of itself the play medium is destructive rather than constructive. Unless play is thoroughly aimed by a controlling structure, it has no direction. Free-play signifies means without any goal. Free-play is as close as humankind comes to processuality untrammelled by structure. It has no enduring structure in its own right. In these, as in other of its attributes, free-play is utterly unlike riddle, although both are implicated in the doing or indexing of change in rituals of transformation. Riddle is always a process controlled, directed, and actualized by a structure of rules in order to produce an outcome, regardless of whether this outcome is deterministic or probabilistic.

In rituals of transformation, riddle is more akin to game. Here, it is sufficient to understand game as play in which rules are regnant. Like riddle, game is a purposive, causal structure with well-defined goals, that generates a limited number of outcomes. Working in accordance with its own rules for producing outcomes, game is also relatively autonomous of context. Again like riddle, game processually makes change happen within itself, often by positing an uncertain, initial condition (for example, sets of opponents) that is made over into another (winners and losers). Therefore, built into game are contrasting or contradictory states of existence that must be resolved through its action. The processuality of game reduces ambiguity by generating resolution. The structure of game also has strong affinities with that of rituals of transformation. But the former differs from the latter, and from the structure of riddle, in one especially crucial respect—game does not subsume a boundary within itself, and so it is neither transformative of boundaries nor of categories or

levels defined by boundaries. All parts of game and their interrelationships are wholly on the same level of abstraction. So, through the action of the game, its elements are reorganized, not transformed.⁶⁰

Of the phenomena discussed here briefly, the processual structure of riddle is most consonant with the idea of ritual of trans-formation. Might this emphasis on trans-formation begin to offer a partial, but unenigmatic explanation of why riddles are enigmatic? I believe that there are three problems involved: first, the question of process; second, the matter of sequence; and third, the problem of levels.

Whatever else trans-formation may be, it cannot be other than processual. Any attempt to signify processuality in terms of itself is extremely difficult. I believe this to be a transcultural problem. It is much easier to represent processuality in terms of structure—in other words, in terms of the absence of process. This is one (unacknowledged) reason for the popularity of structuralist analyses of binary opposition and its mediation. These purport to explain processes of trans-formation, but at best they represent way-stations or points of rest of structure, claiming that one is turned into another through relationships of metaphor and their mediation. In fact, all that such analyses show is that one version of structure becomes another. How this happens—and this “how” must be processual, not structural—is not discussed. It is not surprising, then, that so much structuralist effort has gone into the study of (oral and written) texts (myth, narrative, and so forth), and so little into the study of trans-formation through ritual action. Treating the latter as a series of structural way-stations only highlights the lacunae that actually take participants from one to the other. In fact, very little progress has ever been made in trying to conceptualize and to form processuality in ritual (see V. Turner for one approach to this⁶¹). Probably this cannot be done without the comprehension of structure; but through the present, almost all effort is invested in structural change. The processuality through which this happens is ignored.⁶²

The reason that process is so difficult to conceptualize (at least in descriptive terms) is simply that it (like time, like life) never stands still, and seems never to have the same properties through two consecutive moments (already a structural way of talking about this). Process never reveals itself fully, since “it” is always changing. In other words, processuality, ongoing change, the turning of one phenomenon into another version of itself or into another altogether, is inherently enigmatic. Rituals of trans-formation work only through processuality (and however this is understood, traditional peoples around the world do understand it), through the shaping and harnessing of shifting, enigmatic forces. This is why rituals of trans-formation remain as so many “black boxes” for anthropologists and historians of religion.

I have taken pains to argue that deterministic riddles, those with a single answer or a limited set of answers, though infinitely simpler in organization than such rituals, do have epistemological affinities with rituals of trans-formation. More than this, I have insisted that riddles must be understood as process, and not just as a series of structural permutations; in other words, that riddles make trans-formations happen through their own operation. In part, this is why riddles are enigmatic, but (as in Iroquois dream-guessing) it is their processuality that is enigmatic, not their structure.

Second, when riddle is perceived as sequence, its enigmatic qualities—the turning of something into something else—are most in evidence. The (implicit or explicit) interrogative format drives the riddle object inexorably into the paradoxical trap of

the riddle image: thus, ([/ what is /] / a house / without doors /). It is sequencing that enables one to experience the paradox both from the outside, approaching the puzzle (/ What is /), and from the inside (/ without doors /). And one may argue that if there is not an external perspective on paradox, then it will be extremely difficult to find a way out of this kind of trap solely in terms of its own contradictory interior.⁶³ The exterior perspective on paradox, followed by the interior perspective, is a temporal structure. Sequencing necessarily is a chain of temporality. Time, Henri Bergson commented, is a device to stop everything from happening at once. But the internal time of the riddle is not that of the external time of the wider world, whether the former is counted in the years it may take to answer a Zen koan or the seconds to answer a riddle to which one knows the solution.

John Dorst maintains that riddle is “atemporal or extratemporal,” for in its “internal orientation . . . the space between posing and solving is temporally void—a metaphoric flash in which riddles map a culture’s categories onto one another.”⁶⁴ This view is doubtful. Like the ritual of trans-formation, the riddle has its own temporal rhythms and organization, and these rhythms are not necessarily those of the world beyond ritual and riddle. In both instances, this is possible only because of the relative autonomy from context of certain rituals and riddles. In this regard I am more sympathetic to Bakhtin’s idea of “chronotope” (the combination of time and space to define genre), upon which Dorst bases his approach to riddle, than to his banishing temporality from the riddle by allusions to processuality as a “metaphoric flash” of gestalt. Gestalt does not obviate temporality, but opens up the multimodality and directionality of time. Thus gestalt also can reverse the sense of time. This, I believe, is what happens when an answer is given to a deterministic riddle, and the whole riddle structure rises to the surface to encompass its parts and to reverse the relationship among them—that is, such that the answer then is understood to precede and to generate the question, rather than the opposite.

Thus sequencing is integral to the enigmatic impact of riddle. Sequencing provides an external perspective on riddle that also constitutes ingress into the riddle, driving one inexorably within its paradox, smack against its internal boundary. Similarly, only if this puzzle is rendered nonparadoxical is there sequential egress from the riddle.

A third aspect of the enigmatic in riddles is the problem of levels of abstraction and their relationship to paradox. The Russellian position on logical paradox (one that Lieber has applied to riddles⁶⁵) is that this results from the confusion of a class and its members. That is, both a class included within itself as its own member and a member subsuming itself as a class generate paradox. Although Russell viewed paradox as an affront to logic, cultural and social worlds often recognize logical paradoxes, consider them enigmatic, and make space for them and for their effects.

I have argued that one of these enigmatic effects is the presence of an interior boundary—the “Block”—within a riddle. Nonetheless, there is no way of solving the riddle without penetrating this boundary. Therefore the latter is only a simulation of true paradox, since the boundary is intended to be penetrated.⁶⁶

I have argued also that this dissolution of paradox is accomplished by the creation of a special relationship, one constituting a trans-formation that turns one phenomenon into another—itsself a logical impossibility without recourse to a higher level of abstraction.⁶⁷ Because this sort of boundary seems very like that which would

separate levels of logical abstraction, it may be involved in the modular structure of a riddle (as it is in the structure of a ritual of trans-formation, where the levels involved are often those of the natural and transcendent worlds).

In turn, this has something significant to do with whole/part relationships. I suggested earlier that the appearance of the solution reconstitutes the entire riddle, as a whole that subsumes its parts (question, riddle object, riddle image/boundary, answer). If this whole merely equals the sum of its parts, then it may not exist on a level of abstraction higher than them. However, since this whole is a metaphoric, trans-formative relationship, it is indeed of a power higher than the sum of the parts of that relationship. Therefore, it is on a higher level of abstraction than those parts. Here the relationship between whole and part, class and member, is no longer paradoxical. So the solution does away with enigma in a number of ways. It closes off the processuality of the riddle's causal structure. Moreover, not only does it do away with the enigmatic paradox of the riddle's internal boundary, but it also reestablishes normal relationships between levels of abstraction, between the whole and its parts. In other words, within the riddle module, the trans-formation (i.e., of house into egg) succeeds momentarily, and it does so without recreating paradox. To a degree, then, the logic that relates house to egg within the riddle continues to have some resonance in the world beyond riddle.

The riddle with multiple answers emerges, minimally, as a device for exploration and disambiguation, and the single-answer deterministic riddle emerges maximally as a powerful, small-scale transformer that makes change. This, I have argued, is the continuum of potential functions that are embedded in riddle structure, and therefore the range of the riddle's possible relations to context. Most important is that the structure of riddle need not be altered in order to access one or another of its potential functions. However, the functions themselves that are actualized from this continuum depend in large measure on what it is that particular contexts of performance demand of the riddle. This is the impact of context on the selective usage of riddle. Thus the actual use of riddle is sensitive to context, while the autonomy from context of riddle structure enables the riddle, in turn, to have its effects on context.

These are the reasons that only certain kinds of riddles—single-answer deterministic ones—are selected for embedment and enactment in rituals of transformation, while open-ended riddles that allow or encourage multiple answers are used in contexts that encourage cultural exploration and innovation. And this also is why, in at least some instances, the study of riddle should be elevated from that of genre and classification, and from that of linguistic play and leisure-time expressiveness. I note in closing that much of the same argumentation used here to make a case for the potentially effective power of riddle structure could be used to discuss the transformative effects of some riddles—for example, neck riddles—on the narratives in which they are embedded.⁶⁸

Notes

My thanks to Michael Lieber for his critical and helpful comments on this work. This chapter was completed during a fellowship at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences (SCASSS) in the fall of 1994.

1. Green and Pepicello 1979: 14.
2. Handelman 1990: 1–62.
3. As noted, elsewhere I make the case for this type of “ritual” in detail, calling it “an event that models the lived-in world” (Handelman 1990). However, it would be overly cumbersome to introduce and to justify this concept here. Therefore, I make do with “ritual of trans-formation,” since trans-formation is the *métier* of the event-that-models.
4. Smith 1982: 106.
5. There are extensive difficulties in using the terminology of “rite of passage.” Some of the occasions that ordinarily fall within its purview undoubtedly are trans-formational, turning one kind of being into another. However, others are more markers of transition, indexing changes that have taken place elsewhere, outside of the “ritual” (see Handelman 1990).
6. Anthropologists are uneasy about the metaphysical implications of such cultural purposes and prefer to understand the procedures of such rites as either affective and expressive or mystified, in the Marxist sense. In the former instance, Durkheimian functions like those of group integration and solidarity, or Geertzian “stories that the natives tell themselves about themselves” come to the fore. Such attributions may be quite tangential or irrelevant to native understandings of what they are doing, but these characteristics will make good sense to citizens of modern, Western nation-states, among whom one may number the great bulk of the anthropologists concerned. In the instance of Marxian mystification, ritual is camouflage for power and for the socioeconomic reproduction of the status quo.
7. There is no need here to contrast ideas of causality that depend on continuity through time and contiguity in space, with those that work through metaphor and analogy, except to note that in different cultures any of these may be given fully causal status.
8. I have developed this argument also for the person’s capacity to mold context in everyday life, using the concept of “symbolic type.” See Handelman 1991, 1994, n.d.
9. Bateson 1972.
10. Turner 1977.
11. *Ibid.*
12. This in itself has qualities of riddling, as uncertainty is introduced into the qualities of “boy,” explicitly or implicitly producing questions on the order of, when is a boy not a boy?
13. Without going into this here, the understanding of ritual as an affective medium reflects nineteenth- and twentieth-century common-sensical Western conceptions of the significance of collective occasions in modern nation-states. This understanding has been applied indiscriminately to peoples around the world, without acknowledging its European, statist, epistemological premises.
14. Handelman 1990.
15. Köngäs-Maranda 1971a: 196.
16. Köngäs-Maranda 1971b: 54.
17. Köngäs-Maranda 1971a: 191–192.
18. *Ibid.*, 192; see also Johnson 1975: 146.
19. Johnson 1975: 143, 172.
20. Green and Pepicello 1979: 15.
21. Blacking 1961.
22. Schegloff and Sacks 1973.
23. Schegloff 1968.
24. Green and Pepicello 1979: 15.
25. I am not clear on the status of the imperative form in standard American English and whether the response to an imperative is necessarily included with the latter in a rela-

tively closed syntactic and semantic set. Nonetheless, the form of injunction—of a command for an answer—likely is implicit in the structuring of a question in standard American English.

26. This has something to do with comments during our discussions that there is a sense of loss, of almost tragic diminishment, in the solutions to many riddles. Riddles often move from the mysterious, beckoning riddle image, fraught with multidirectional potential, to a solution that frequently is a simple, banal, inanimate object. This sense of loss may be a function of the causal structure of riddle, in which the creation of certainty of outcome, and outcome that is certain, involves the narrowing of perspectives, the lowering of horizons, and the disambiguation of the potentialities with which enigma is imbued. I offer another perspective on this problem at the close of this chapter. And see Hasan-Rokem: this volume.

27. This may be why riddles are usefully employed to play on the mysteries of selfhood that are revealed through the Other (i.e., the journey to selfhood through otherness), and that are returned to the self-as-other, or now as an-other. See Cohen: this volume.

28. Kōngäs-Maranda 1971a: 192.

29. Anderson and Moore 1960.

30. Johnson 1975: 142.

31. Abrahams 1968: 152.

32. Lieber 1976.

33. Virtanen 1977: 80–83.

34. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978: 8–9. And see Kaivola-Bregenhøj: this volume.

35. Virtanen 1977: 84.

36. *Ibid.*, 81.

37. In view of my argument for the causal structure of riddle, it is worth noting here that in Estonia, winter twilight riddling is thought to be related to the fertility of farm animals (Virtanen 1977: 83).

38. Ben-Amos 1976: 252.

39. *Ibid.*, 254.

40. Layton 1986: 47.

41. Zug 1967.

42. Kōngäs-Maranda 1971b: 53, 59.

43. Hacking 1975: 7.

44. This point has been made for other Indian contests, in work by myself and David Shulman (forthcoming).

45. The deterministic riddle or contest may be broken down into two basic alternatives. The first depends indeed on the existence of perfect knowledge, that makes the solution or winning inevitable: perfect knowledge makes the cosmos deterministic. By contrast, the second may make inevitable the prevention of an absence of solution, or the prevention of loss. For example, the riddle or game may be probabilistic, but its outcome is then made determinate in advance, through various prophylactic, causal steps. It is not clear whether such devices require a deterministic cosmos. See note 60.

46. Hamnett 1967: 389.

47. Kōngäs-Maranda 1971a: 192.

48. Basgoz 1965.

49. Roberts and Forman 1971: 520.

50. Abrahams 1968; 1982.

51. Williams 1963.

52. Eber: this volume.

53. During the ritual meal, the seder, the narrative of the Israelite exodus from Egypt is recounted. This narrative has riddle-like qualities, as Galit Hasan-Rokem pointed out in dis-

cussion, that metaphorize the transition from childhood to maturity, both of the mythic nation of Israel and of the participants in the ritual meal. It is worth briefly explicating these qualities here.

At the beginning of the ritual meal, the leader of the seder divides the middle unleavened bread (*matza*) of three into two unequal parts, and puts aside the larger of these, the *afiqoman*. This will be the last food eaten in the meal, and is necessary for the completion of the seder. Shortly after, the youngest child present recites the riddle-like “four questions” that ask why this night (of Passover eve) is different from all other nights. The child is expected to follow strictly the exact textual wording of the “questions.” Then follows the answer, which in fact is the entire narrative of the exodus—the freeing of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and the beginnings of their maturation as a people. During the reading of the narrative, the children “steal” and hide the *afiqoman*. At the close of the meal, the seder leader must bargain with the children over the ransom of the *afiqoman*, without which the ritual meal cannot be concluded.

Just as the ritual unfolding of the answers to the riddle-like “questions” tell of the maturation into obligation and responsibility of the Israelites, so, too, this is demonstrated in tandem through the changing behavior of the children present at the meal. The child who recites the “questions” represents all children and is normatively bound in the immaturity of ignorance. In taking the *afiqoman*, the children demonstrate increasing freedom, but without responsibility. Then, in reaching agreement over its return, the children show the sense of obligation of moral maturity in striking a contractual-like agreement with adults. In this regard, the seder communicates answers to the riddle of maturation on various levels, from the mythic to the social and personal, without which neither the people nor the person is complete. The return of the *afiqoman*, of course, completes once again the holism of the middle of unleavened bread. In this instance, the seder continuously implicates change, and indexes its narration, although it does not in itself effect change.

54. Zug 1967.

55. Ramanujan 1986: 12.

56. Blau 1963: 236–237, 242, 245; Wallace 1958: 237–240, 245.

57. E.g., de Caro 1986: 181.

58. Lieber 1976: 262.

59. For a discussion of these features, see Handelman 1992; 1990: 63–72; 1987; 1977.

60. This description of game is probabilistic and has dominated the scholarly study of *agon*. Scholars with markedly different perspectives have related the emergence of ideas of probability to modernism (cf. Hacking 1975; Baudrillard 1982; Bork 1980), although there is by no means consensus on this (see Patey 1984). Nonetheless, any determinism of outcome contravenes from the outset the probabilistic logic of game and contest and is perceived as “rigging” the play, as cheating. Yet in other cultures there seem to be ways of doing contests that are virtually akin to what I am calling “ritual of transformation.” These games and contests are intended to be trans-formative precisely by activating higher metaphysical levels that are also loci of greater power. These “contests,” “games,” or “rites” are deterministic in at least one of two senses. Either a winner is known in advance (perhaps on a mysterious or godly level of knowledge), or (in Western gambling terms), “the house always wins.” That is, the act of gaming or contesting is itself generative on a higher, cosmic level. Although the distribution of success and failure may be extremely important to the contestants, all such action generates the determined and necessary outcome on the cosmic level. The latter never loses, as long as the contesting is done, and done properly.

So Kuiper (1960: 279) writes of the ancient Vedic verbal contest: “The ceremonial contests of poets . . . were at the same time a ritual that aimed at a renewal of life and the winning of the sun” (see also Johnson 1980). And Heesterman (1957: 140–157) interprets the “dice”

game that was integral to the Vedic royal consecration (*rājasūya*) as a game that generated cosmogony, the person of the king, and cosmic integration. Here the king himself was never a contestant, but received all the cosmogonic spoils of the contest. The doing of the contest assured its outcome, and thereby deterministically put its cosmic beneficiary beyond the risks run by the players.

More recently, White (1989) discusses the killing of a “four-eyed dog” as a prelude to the royal Vedic rite of the horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*). Following the sacrifice of the dog, the royal horse was set free to wander. The peoples whose lands the horse’s hoofs touched had to acknowledge the authority of the king or be fought by his armies. After a year of wandering, and only if the armies remained undefeated, the horse was sacrificed and the king was declared a universal sovereign.

White argues that the setting for the dog sacrifice was a giant dice game whose outcome was probabilistic, yet that was crucial to the success of the king’s horse and armies. In this game, a microcosm of the cosmic game of life, “four-eyed dog” signified the dice throw or move that would defeat the king’s armies during the year of the horse’s wanderings. By killing the dog, the king eliminated from the game the possibility of his own loss (i.e., that of his armies). Therefore the horse would be sacrificed successfully and the king declared the *dharmarāja*. In my terms, the king made the game deterministic in outcome.

61. Turner 1977.

62. I am not ignoring recent formulations in “performance theory” and their insistence that significance and meaning are functions of praxis, not of structure and the logics of form. Transformation is in its doing, not in reflection on this. The problem is that transformation is continually understood by advocates of performance on the one hand as an “anthropology of experience” (e.g., Turner and Bruner 1986) and on the other as the construction of power relationships (e.g., Bell 1992: 197ff.). What is changed through enactment is individual experience and/or individual action—regardless of what the structural program insists is to be accomplished. Advocates of performance make good feelings stand in for cosmic renewal, or they make strategies of struggle efface fellowship in favor of the exercise of power. The output of ritual becomes affective and expressive or strategic, in each instance a mirror image of platitudinous Western attitudes to theology, theater, and politics.

63. Handelman 1992.

64. Dorst 1983: 423.

65. Lieber 1976.

66. Lieber (1976) develops a different, interesting perspective on riddle in terms of levels of class and member, according to the Theory of Logical Types. He argues that the relationship created by riddle image and answer does not involve any crossing of boundaries. Instead, this relationship dissolves boundaries, such that a temporary, new class is created on the basis of common function (e.g., the properties of protective enclosure common to both house and egg). This new class, a whole in my terms, then also subsumes its members (i.e., question and answer, house and egg, and so on). Lieber (1976: 264) argues that it is precisely because a new class is created that such riddles have more than one answer. The advantage of Lieber’s perspective is the systemic flexibility that it attributes to the combinatorial possibilities of categorization and to their role in the cognitive exploration of the world. However, he excludes determinism in the operation of riddle structure. Nonetheless, more recently (personal communication, 1 October 1990) he has suggested that if riddle structure is approached as a design for cryptographic encoding, “then there is a very large set of logical possibilities for constructing riddles that have one and only one answer.” Thus, as I argue in the body of this chapter, there emerges the likelihood of at least two kinds of riddle structure—the deterministic sort that I associate with the ritual of transformation and the probabilistic sort that Lieber and Köngäs-Maranda associate with exploration and/or innovation.

67. T. Turner 1977.

68. The neck riddle in tale and text is clear-cut and consequential. The respondent has a binary choice—either to solve the riddle or to fail: to save his/her neck or to forfeit it. Its similarities to a test by ordeal are striking. The neck riddle is highly deterministic, although versions of a story may develop diametrically opposed outcomes. This determinism is even stronger in instances where the protagonist has to invent the riddle, for then the entire riddle structure is a projection of the world of imagination and experience of the protagonist and is quite impenetrable to others. The protagonist utterly controls the whole and its parts, in all their aspects.

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4

"I'll Give You Three Guesses:" The Dynamics of Genre in the Riddle-Tale

RICHARD BAUMAN

Riddles and related enigmatic genres turn, characteristically, on ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning. Hence, it is scarcely surprising that these enigmatic forms are themselves generically ambiguous. Certainly, the definition and classification of such forms is notoriously problematic, as observed by Laurits Bødker in offering the rationale for his dictionary of riddle terms in the Nordic languages:

The riddle is so short and concise that, unlike e.g. the ballad and the folktale, it is easy to handle. But as regards content, and very often form as well, it is at the same time so richly faceted and ambiguous that it easily lends itself to classification in any of several groups, a fact which is well-known to everybody who has tried to find a certain riddle in the published collections.¹

Sorting out the elementary forms of the riddle is difficult enough, but the capacity of the riddle and related enigmatic forms to blend with other genres, as in riddle ballads, neck riddles,² and so on, makes the problem still more complex. The blending of riddle and narrative is especially slippery, making for expressive complexes that are marked by a high degree of generic indeterminacy. In his foundational survey of the classic neck riddle, F. J. Norton observes that there is considerable "variation in the relative importance of tale and riddle" in the oral tradition.³

A number of scholars, including Max Lüthi, John Dorst, and Roger Abrahams,⁴ have explored the blending of riddle and folktale. While Lüthi's chapter contains a number of suggestive (if impressionistic) insights, the essays by Dorst and Abrahams are more productive for our purposes here, in treating the interaction of riddle and narrative as a problem in genre theory and in bringing to bear on the problem the perspectives of M. M. Bakhtin, in particular Bakhtin's notion of secondary (complex) speech genres. Bakhtin draws a distinction between primary (simple) genres and secondary (complex) genres that are created out of the combination and interpenetration of primary genres. "During the process of their [secondary genres'] for-

mation," he writes, "they absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communication. These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones." Bakhtin's conception of genre would direct attention to "thematic content, style, . . . compositional structure," and "the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication" in which each genre, as a relatively conventionalized discourse type, is grounded.⁵ Thus, the comprehension of secondary genres would require analysis of how generic blending is accomplished in terms of the interrelationships among these defining features.

After offering an especially useful summary of Bakhtin's perspective on genre and its implications for the folkloristic study of genre, Dorst discusses one type of riddle-tale, the neck riddle, in terms of its reliance on the imagery of the grotesque, a symbolic correlative of the generic yoking of opposites that secondary genres represent, and in terms of Bakhtin's notion of chronotope, the distinctive time/place orientation of each primary genre that shapes its content and compositional structure and must be negotiated in secondary genres as contrastive chronotopes interact. Abrahams, in turn, draws on his extensive corpus of ethnographic data on expressive culture in the West Indies to illuminate the range of combinatory variability in the blending of riddle and narrative and to relate the dynamic of generic definition and manipulation as locally constituted to broader social and cultural factors. Neither Dorst nor Abrahams, however, offers the sort of close form-function-meaning analysis that would appear to be called for by the Bakhtinian perspective and related efforts in current genre research.⁶ That is what I propose to undertake in this chapter: an analysis of riddle tales in terms of formal features, the functional loads and interrelationships of these constituent features, and the implications of this generic blending for the field of meaning that the resultant hybrid forms invite us to enter.

My data consist of two riddle-narrative texts recorded by Hamish Henderson of the School of Scottish Studies from Andrew Stewart, a Scottish traveler from Perthshire, in the 1950s.⁷ The tales are versions of AT 922, "The Shepherd Substituting for the Priest Answers the King's Questions" (The King and the Abbot), and AT 927, "Out-Riddling the Judge," the classic neck riddle tale type.⁸ They were recorded one right after the other in that order, and the latter tale is linked by Henderson and Stewart to the former. Thus, the two tales were interrelated in performance, and I will treat them as a package. I should note explicitly that by identifying these texts as riddle tales, or neck riddle, or tale types 922 or 927, I do not mean to subscribe to the assumptions and classificatory principles that underlie the standard terms and the Type Index, but only to identify the material under study for preliminary and heuristic purposes in terms recognizable to readers. I have transcribed the texts from a copy of Henderson's field tape; both texts are also in Katharine Briggs's *Dictionary of British Folktales*, volume 2, but my transcription differs somewhat from hers in format and in closer fidelity to the original.⁹ Here are the texts.

Text 1 The King and the Miller

There was once upon a time a miller. He had a meal mill in this country place. And in those days the kings were very strict with them, they would take the land off them, and their premises, you see, for some reason.

So the miller (it was a Sunday), and the miller was walkin' down the lade-side, the river-side, and he saw the King and his army comin' on horse-back, you see?

So the King stopped and he says, "Hello," he says, "are you the miller along here?"

And the miller says, "Yes," he says. He knew he was a nobleman of some kind. So he says, "Well," he says, "I've come," he says, "to collect your mill and take everything, your land off ye," he says, "and your meal and that," he says, "for every year that you're makin' it," he says. He says, "But I'm a sportin' man. I always give a man a chance." He says, "I'll give you three guesses," he says, "and if you can guess the three guesses within a year and a day," he says, "you can keep your mill."

So the guess he was given, it was impossible for to get them. That was the sort. They just gave the men a chance, to keep them in agony, you know, and thinkin' about the thing.

So anyway, he says, "What is the guesses?"

"Well," he says, "First," he says, "I want to know the weight of the moon." You see?

And what was the next one? How many stars was in the sky?

And the next one, "Could you tell me what," the King, he says, "Can you tell me what I'm thinkin' on? And I'll give you a year and a day to find that out."

So the miller says, "Now," he says, "wait a minute," he says. "That's the weight of the moon," he says, "and all the stars that's in the sky, and what you're thinkin' on," he says, "your Highness."

And the King says, "Yes."

"Well," he says, "all right," he says, "a year and a day."

So of course the army and the King rode away.

But as the years . . . as the weeks was goin' by and the months was goin' by the girl asked him—he'd a lovely daughter—and he [*sic*] asked him, she says, "Father, what's wrong with you?" she says. "You look awful worried," she says, "this last two or three weeks."

"Och," he says, "nothing." He would nae tell her, to keep the girl frae worryin', you see?

But at the finish up, he coaxed her [*sic*] to tell, and he told her, "Well," he says, told her about the King giving the guesses. And he says, "How I'm gonna do it," he says, "I don't know."

But here, this is where Jack comes in. There was a man, Silly Jack, wasn't there? So Jack . . . She goes and she tells Jack. He was a workin' hand aboot the place, but he was a kinda daft fella, this, and she goes and tells him what happened, his [*sic*] father was goin' tae. . . . Anyway.

So Jack made a bargain wi' her. He says, "If I can get your father's life saved," he says, "and save his property," he says, "will you marry me?"

And the girl says "Yes," she says, "Jack, I'll do anything that you want if you can save my father's life and save the mill and a' thing." You see?

So anyway, the father's goin' aboot worried, he cannae think. He takes tae his bed at the finish-up, no well, you see?

And Jack, so he's workin' about the mill as usual, and when the year and the day come up, at the time he had tae meet the King, Jack goes and dresses hissel' as this old miller. He puts a gray wig on his heid, a beard, a long white beard, and his white moustache, and a stick, and the miller's old claes, and a pair o' white boots (meal that was on his boots, you see?), and he goes along the mill-lade, just marching along as usual as what the miller does. But here the old man's lyin' in the bed no well. That was Jack that was goin' along, you see?

So he meets the King, and he stops as usual.

And he says, "Are you the old miller?" he says. "You look very old."

"Aye," he says, says the miller, he says, "I am gettin' old."

He says, "Did you find out," he says, "the guesses?" he says. "I want ye," he says, "to know," he says, "what I'm thinkin' on," he says. "Have you got the riddles yet?" You see?

So he says, "No," he says, "but," he says, "it didnae give me no thought," he says, "but," he says, "I'll try my best," says the miller, he says, "and guess them." See?

So the King says to him . . .

"Well," he says, "what is the first one?" He says, "What is the first one again?" he says to the King.

The King says, "The first one is," he says, "Jack," he says, "is the weight of the moon."

So Jack says, "Oh, that's easy."

But he thought it was the old miller. He thought it was the miller, you see.

The old miller says, "Oh, that's easy."

"Is it?" said the King. He says, "What is it?"

"Well," he says, "there are four quarters in the moon," and he says "four quarters in a ton," he says. "That must make the moon a ton." You see? A ton. Four quarters in the moon, there's four quarters of a ton, the moon must weigh a ton.

So he says, "If you don't believe me," he says, "you can go weight it," he says, "or do somethin' like that to prove it."

So the King says, "Well," he says, "it might be so," he says. "I don't know," he says. "I believe," he says, "you're right there."

"But," he says, "the second one," he says, "will puzzle you," he says. "How many stars are in the sky?"

So of course Jack looked at him and blundered out a big figure, you know, that the King couldn't hardly follow, you see?

And the King looked at him, scratched his head, looks at him and says, "Well . . ."

And says Jack, "If you don't believe me," he says, "just start and coont them."

So the King could nae coont all the stars, you see, and he says, "Well," he says, "it could be right," he says, "but the last one'll beat you," says the King. He says, "You cannae tell me," he says, "what I'm thinkin' on."

"Oh yes," says Jack. He says, "You're thinkin'," he says, "you're speakin' to the old miller," he says, "but you'll find it's his goodson you're speakin' tae," and he pulls off the wig and the beard off his face, and straightens hissel' up.

And it was very clever, wasn't it?¹⁰

Text 2 Under the Earth I Go

HH: Do you know a story, the same sort of story, // with a rhyme . . . ?

AS: // It's something the same. And the joke in this one was, "Under the earth . . ."

The boy had to give this King a joke that the King's men and his knights and that couldnae guess, and the King himself couldnae guess, so he got a year and a day for to do the same thing in this other place, you see?

So it was the opposite way about, like—the boy had to give the King the riddles.

So here when the boy gave the riddles, he'd a year and a day. He hadnae to tell the riddles, he had to give the riddles when he landed in the place. And he got a year and a day to think what riddles he was gonna give the King, you understand?

So here he mounted his horse, Jack, and he went to the King's palace, and all the army was there, you see, and the King's guards, so the riddle had tae be read out, so Jack . . . one o' the men read the riddle out, and the riddle was:

Under the earth I go,
On the oak leaf I stand,

I ride on the filly that never was foaled,
and I carry the dead in my hand.

So they tried to guess and guess, and everybody tried to guess, but they couldnae make out what it was.

And what the thing was, Jack, his father had an old mare, a horse, you know, a mare—she was in foal. He knocked the mare down, killed her, cuts up the mare, which was near foalin', takes the foal out, out of her stomach, you see, takes the foal out, rears it up, gets on its back, he fills his hat up with earth, puts oak leafs in his shoes, and that's where the riddle goes. He made a whip o' the mother's hide, skin, and that was what the riddle was, and they couldnae guess it.

And he told them, "Under the earth I go:" he takes his hat off—it was full of sand.

He takes his boots off. He says, "On the oak leaf I stand:" there was oak leafs in his boots.

He says, "I ride on this filly," he says, "that never was foaled," he says: he told them how he'd done it.

And he says, "I carry the dead in my hand:" it was the mother's dead skin that he had in the hand for the whip.

It's quite good, isn't it?¹¹

The Dynamics of Genre in the Riddle-Tale

Taking nothing for granted, let us begin by establishing in general and preliminary terms the basis for treating these texts as generic hybrids of folktale and riddle. The first text, we may observe right away, opens with the classic generic marker of traditional folktales: "There was once upon a time a miller." Moreover, both are clearly narratives in formal terms, reporting events in terms of a temporal sequence of actions in which the relationship of sequentiality also implies consequentiality. Again, both narratives are crafted in such a way as to move from a state of tension, conflict, imbalance to a resolution of the disequilibrium, a criterial attribute of the folktale (and, some would say, of all narrative).¹² Still further, the central protagonist in both texts is Silly Jack, the generic hero in the traditional folktale repertoire of the Scots travelers, the humble, unpromising youth who prevails at the end of the story.¹³ In overall compass, then, these are clearly folktales.

Within the tales, however, are enigmatic dialogic routines, consisting of question-answer pairs, that are most often called "guesses," but are also referred to in the text as "riddles." Thus the narrator gives us at least a preliminary warrant to examine the text in terms of the interactive combination of folktale and riddle. In eliciting the second text, Henderson asks for a "story with a rhyme," using two generic terms, and receives this narrative with a rhyme in it. Stewart, however, refers to the rhyme once as a "joke" and three times as a "riddle." As Kenneth Goldstein informs us, "joke" is an alternative term for riddle in the Northeast of Scotland, and a good riddle in that region has to be rhymed, as this one is.¹⁴ While "joke" and "rhyme" open up other intergeneric dimensions, I want to stick for the moment to interaction between riddle and folktale, warranted by the narrator himself. Finally, we may observe that Stewart closes both tales with his own evaluations of the riddling: "And it was very clever, wasn't it?" "It's quite good, isn't it?" This, too, is a common feature of riddling in the northeast of Scotland.¹⁵

Now, although Andrew Stewart's calling the enigmatic questions "riddles" opens the way for us to examine what relation they actually bear to riddles as conventionally defined, we must not simply take the term as transparent, but look closely at what they are and how they work. Clearly, the king's questions are not of the classic "true riddle" type—that is, "enigmatic questions in the form of descriptions whose referent must be guessed."¹⁶ To be sure, they do have certain riddle elements. They are enigmatic, which is to say they require special interpretive work, and while they are not all in interrogative form grammatically speaking, they do have the illocutionary force of questions. Even further, the first two guesses, concerning the weight of the moon and how many stars are in the sky, employ common riddle terms: a glance at Archer Taylor's *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* reveals that the moon is a richly productive riddle image and referent and the uncountability of the stars is also a traditional riddle figure.¹⁷ Nevertheless, these enigmatic questions differ fundamentally from riddles in being unanswerable; riddles, as generally defined, must be answerable, though with difficulty, and must contain within themselves a basis for arriving at the answer, however disguised.¹⁸ To this point, then, we have some riddle-like non-riddles, in formal and functional terms. How do they work in the tale?

The narrative opens with an assertion of the king's power, expressed as an intention to take away the mill from the miller. This is institutional power, the right of the king to confiscate his subjects' property. The king does offer a way out, however, though not a very promising one: if the miller can guess the answers to the questions the king will pose to him, he can keep his mill. In effect, the king makes his institutional power subject to a kind of contest of interactional power, pitting the difficulty of his questions against the miller's ability to come up with the right answers. There is an intellectual element here as well, of course, insofar as figuring out acceptable answers requires cleverness and wit, but I emphasize the interactional dimension because it is the speaking of the questions and answers by which the contest is played out, and this is governed by interactional abilities and conventions. We are dealing, then, with two different spheres of power, institutional versus interactional, which, while they are frequently related, are potentially separable from one another; a person who is structurally subordinate in institutional terms may nevertheless dominate a structurally superordinate person in a given interaction by force of wit, rhetorical skill, or some other interactional means. This is, in fact, a common theme in folktales, as witness the large number of motifs in the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, sections J1250–J1499, "Clever verbal retorts" and J1500–J1649, "Clever practical retorts," that turn on this dynamic. Here, Jack's transformation of the king's enigmatic questions serves as the means to a basic folktale end.

Now, because of the king's institutional power, he is in a position to load the scales to his own interactional advantage. First, and most obviously, he is the one who sets the terms of the contest: the miller must answer his questions or lose the mill. Second, the king claims an advantage by setting up the interactional contest in terms of questions and answers: interrogation vests significant control in the hands of the interrogator. The compulsive power of questions has been illuminated by the sociolinguistic explorations of Emanuel Schegloff and Harvey Sacks, J. Sinclair and R. Coulthard, Esther Goody, and others.¹⁹ Questions and answers belong to a class of conversational utterance sequences that Schegloff and Sacks have labeled adjacency pairs; these consist of a pair of utterances, spoken by two different interlocutors in the conver-

sation, the second utterance elicited by and following directly on the first. The speaking of the first pair part of an adjacency pair exerts a strong compulsive force on the addressee to produce the second pair part; when a question is asked, the expectation is that the next utterance will be a relevant answer. As summarized by Goody, "The most general thing we can say about a question is that it compels, requires, may even demand, a response."²⁰ The king's questions are, in Goody's terms, strong "control" questions: not mitigated by deference or politeness markers (as in "Excuse me, could you please tell me what time it is?"), backed by the king's institutional power, deeply consequential for the addressee, and so on. Finally, the king's questions are intended to be—and are framed in the story as—unanswerable. They are especially enigmatic questions which nevertheless demand an answer.

As if the king's advantage in the interactional contest were not enough, the situation is made still worse as the story proceeds. The miller, so overburdened by the difficulty in which the king has placed him, takes to his bed. When his daughter is finally able to draw out of him the reason for his distress, to whom does she turn but Silly Jack, "a kinda daft fella" in her father's employ. How can a silly, daft hired hand answer the terrible enigmatic questions on which the fate of the miller and his daughter rests? The story now hangs on whether—and how—Jack can render the king's unanswerable questions answerable. Note here that Jack's bargain with the miller's daughter gives him a special stake in answering the king's questions; the questions now function for him as a suitor test. How does Jack beat the king at his interactional game? What he does, by a variety of fascinating strategems, is to reframe the king's questions, transforming them from unanswerable control questions to something else, from "impossible for to get" to "Oh, that's easy." Let us examine the transformations one by one.

For the first question, "What is the weight of the moon?" Jack's strategy is to transform it from an unanswerable control question into something more nearly akin to a riddle he can answer. He accomplishes this by resorting to one of the basic formative principles of riddles, namely, analogy,²¹ etymologically "equality of proportions" (from the Greek *ana* [according to] + *logos* [proportion]). Thus, a ton—a unit of weight and therefore an appropriate basis for analogy—is conventionally divided into "quarters," so that the word "quarter" can refer to a quarter of a ton. The moon also has quarters, in this instance a unit of time. By analogy, then, the moon weighs a ton. Rendered fully as a riddle, Jack's transformation would yield,

Why does the moon weigh a ton?—because it has four quarters.

In addition, Jack exploits a basic vulnerability of the king's question, namely, that the king does not know the answer himself, which deprives him of full interactional power. Jack's answer is unverifiable, so he is able to seize the interactional advantage by challenging the king to weigh it himself.

This latter strategy, exploiting the king's lack of knowledge of the "true" answer to his own question and challenging him to verify the answer Jack gives him, is used by itself to neutralize the power of the king's second question, "How many stars are in the sky?" Any large number will do as an answer, and the king is bested once again.

Jack's neutralization of the third question is the most interesting of all. Again, as in the first question, Jack resorts to a riddling strategy, but at a deeper structural level. The enigma represented by the third question, "What I'm thinkin' on," rests

on the fact that the king's private thoughts are unknowable to others—the king himself is the enigma. This time, however, the king does know the answer, or so he believes. Accordingly, the question should have full power. In order to neutralize this power, Jack transforms himself, makes himself into an enigma. More specifically, he makes himself into a kind of metaphor by predicating another sign image—the miller—upon himself and so formulating a deception, the manipulation of features of the situation in such a way as to induce the king to have a false or misleading sense of what is going on and so to behave to his own disadvantage.²² The block element in the situation, as it were, is the metaphor “the miller is Jack.” The narrator foreshadows Jack's answer between the first and second exchanges by telling us, “But he thought it was the old miller. He thought it was the miller, you see.” Now, because Jack has manipulated the basis of the king's knowledge, his thoughts, he has the means of turning the tables. For at least one aspect of the king's thoughts, Jack has knowledge that the king does not, but thinks he does. He is able to tell the king what he is thinking, but even further, and more powerfully, he is able to falsify that knowledge, thus gaining a still greater measure of interactional power.

Thus, by the use of his wits and his interactional skills at reframing the interrogation, Jack wins the day. By reframing the interrogational routines, Jack renders the questions answerable, neutralizes and overcomes the king's advantage, and reverses the power relation of their interaction. And just as the king's perceptions are overturned, so are our own, as Jack transforms himself from the daft Silly Jack, the miller's hired hand, to clever Jack, the miller's son-in-law (“goodson”).

The transformation of enigmatic forms in the course of the tale represents one significant element of the narrativization of these forms, the narrative, in fact, turning on the process of transformation and its outcome. This returns us, then, to the problem with which we began—that is, the interaction of the “riddles” and the “story” in the constitution of the hybrid generic form in which they are blended together. One further point worth making in this regard is that the transformational process just mentioned is not the only means exploited in the text for narrativizing the enigmatic forms. A second device for creating sequence is the trebling of the interrogational routines. Threefold repetition, of course, in compliance with Olrik's Law of Three,²³ represents yet another characteristic structural feature of the European folktale. In this text, the questions are not only trebled, but the sequence of three is rendered three times: once when the king first poses them to the miller, again when the miller reviews the questions after they have been posed, and yet again when the king returns after a year and a day and poses them to Jack, now disguised as the miller. Earlier in this paper, in discussing the compulsive power of questions, I appealed to Schegloff and Sacks's notion of adjacency pairs, in which the utterance of the first pair part calls for a response. The speech acts that constitute adjacency pairs thus have a temporal, sequential order. Contrary to Dorst's contention, then, that riddles are atemporal,²⁴ riddles and analogous interrogational routines like the ones in this story are inherently sequential. Accordingly, the question-response sequence lends itself to narrativization; the reporting of a question-response sequence can itself constitute a minimal narrative.

In this text, the crucial narrated events are built on this basic interactional structure. The first key event centers on the posing of the questions by the king. The completion of the adjacency pairs, however, is suspended, as the king gives the miller a year

and a day to come up with the answers. The resultant lack of closure, in turn, provides the dynamic tension of the narrative. This tension can only be resolved by the provision of the second pair parts, the answers to the questions. When these are provided by Jack, narrative closure is achieved. But the narrator—in Jack's voice—goes still further, elaborating on the sequentiality of riddling interactions by adding other optional elements to the account—namely, explication and elaboration of the answers and acceptance of them by the king. Jack explains the reasoning that has led him to his answers and challenges the king to refute them. The king cannot do so, and is thus constrained to acknowledge that Jack's answers are "right." The "riddles," then, have a formative—indeed, a constitutive—effect on the structure of the narrative, at the same time that they are contained by it, as reported speech.

One last point. In the climactic narrated event of the story, the first two question-answer sequences are rendered as reported speech. The speech acts that make up these sequences constitute the narrative action. In the third exchange, however, there is an important additional element. Here we have not only the speech acts of the king and Jack, represented as direct discourse in which the king poses his enigmatic question and Jack answers, but also the enactment or embodiment of the ultimate enigma: the miller is Jack. That is to say, the final interaction consists of two kinds of action, speaking and metaphorical enactment. Jack simultaneously speaks the answer and is the answer. Moreover, he goes on, as before, to explicate his answer by removing his disguise. Thus, the third enigmatic exchange is narrativized both mimetically, in the quoted speech, and diegetically, as the description of action.

Ultimately, then, the text reveals its hybrid generic makeup as the interpenetration and mutual adaptation of a transformational sequence of enigmatic interrogational forms, themselves formally and functionally related to riddles, and the narrative folktale. The structure of question and answer adjacency pairs and the riddle dynamic of enigma and transformation give form and texture to the narrative, while the narrative in turn encompasses the interrogational routines, and folktale conventions contribute additional elements of structure (e.g., the opening formula, the Law of Three) and content (e.g., Silly Jack, the marriage of the unpromising hero) to the textual mix. The resultant text is a complex generic hybrid that blends riddle-like interrogational routines with the folktale in the construction of an emergent generic blend with its own structures of form, function, and meaning.

When we turn our attention to the second text, we encounter again the playing out of the tension between institutional power and interactional power. In this version of the classic neck-riddle tale, the King exercises his royal power by setting Jack the task of posing a riddle that he and his knights cannot answer, with the implication that the task will be difficult. Accordingly, Jack is given the formulaic year and a day to accomplish it. In this text, the consequences of failure are not specified, but again the implication is that Jack will pay a penalty if he is unsuccessful; this is a generic convention of the folktale.

By contrast with the first text, then, as the narrator himself observes, the interactional roles of the riddling exchange are reversed: "So it was the opposite way aboot, like—the boy had to give the King the riddles." From a functional point of view, however, either role—riddler or riddlee—may serve as a basis for achieving interactional dominance. Riddling is contestive: if the riddlee cannot answer the riddle suc-

cessfully, the poser wins, while if the riddlee does come up with the answer, he wins. Thus, when the king and his knights are stymied by Jack's riddle, he has bested them, overturning by his interactional skill the power that allowed the king to set him the riddling task at the outset. In terms of narrative structure, the disequilibrium established by the difficult task is resolved by Jack's successful posing of a riddle that the king cannot solve.

The factor that makes Jack's riddle insoluble is that, like the king's third enigmatic question in the first text ("Can you tell me what I'm thinkin' on?"), it is based on private experience. Jack formulates his riddle on the basis of his own unusual actions, inaccessible to the king and his retainers. Again, as before, Jack's success turns on his ability to create a disjunction between appearance and reality by means of concealment. As he prevails by means of disguise in the first text, he succeeds in the second text—at least in part—by concealment, hiding the dirt under his hat and the oak leaves in his shoes. Extending the comparison still further, we may observe that both routines turn on Jack's transformation of himself into the embodiment of the enigma. By disguising himself as the miller in text 1 and by concealing the dirt and leaves on his person in text 2, Jack turns the verbal interrogational routines into narrative action. The enigma is both spoken and enacted.

When we examine the workings of the riddle in formal terms, several interesting factors come to light. First, note that this riddle takes the form of a rhyme, a valued feature of riddles in the northeast of Scotland; the first and third lines display half rhyme, while the second and fourth lines exhibit full rhyme. Thus, while the enigmatic questions of the first text can be invaded by the surrounding narrative discourse, as witness the indirect discourse in which the king's second question is rendered ("How many stars was in the sky?"), the form of this riddle makes it impenetrable. As read out by the king's men, it is quoted speech, retaining the first person singular "I" of the personified riddle referent. This mode of personification is a common riddle device,²⁵ so at the point when Jack's riddle is posed, it is not necessarily clear that the first person voice of the riddle is his own. The revelation that Jack embodies and enacts the riddle only occurs with the ensuing explications.

In this text, as in the first one, the dialogic structure of the riddle, consisting of a question-answer adjacency pair, again shapes the structure of the narrative, though in a different way than before. In the earlier tale, the king's questions establish the central disequilibrium, resolved when Jack supplies the answers after the year and a day have elapsed. Here, though, the disequilibrium is produced by the king's setting of the riddling task; resolution is thus achieved when Jack produces the riddle and it does prove unanswerable. To stop here, however, would still make for a lack of closure. It is a convention of riddling that if the riddlee cannot guess the answer, the poser will provide it, as Jack does in the tale;²⁶ moreover, the narrative audience will want to know the answer as well. Accordingly, the end of the tale is shaped by the structure of riddling events. And, as before, the structure includes an explication of the riddle.

Closer examination of the narrativization of the riddle, however, reveals additional degrees of complexity. Note, to begin with, that the first explication of the riddle is directed at the storytelling audience, outside the narrated event: "And what the thing was." When the riddle is posed in the story, both the king and his retainers in

the narrated event and the audience in the narrative event share the same information state: ignorance of the answer. This first explication establishes a differential; now the audience knows more than the king and his knights. Specifically, the hearers of the tale learn how Jack has enabled the riddle by his private actions: "And that was the riddle was and they couldnae guess it." In many neck-riddle tales, this enabling action is part of the plot, preceding and leading up to the making of the riddle and its presentation to the riddlee. In this text, however, the basis of the riddle is given after the riddle is posed, which represents a temporal displacement. Note, too, that this first explication, for the audience, follows the chronology of Jack's enabling actions, not the sequence of descriptive elements in the riddle. More on this shortly.

Having explicated the enigma for the audience by recounting how Jack set up his riddle at an earlier point in narrative time, the narrator provides a second explication, this one for the king and his retainers within the narrated event, by having Jack repeat each descriptive element in the riddle, in sequence, revealing the referent of each as he proceeds—the first and second by physical demonstration, the third by verbal explanation, and the fourth in an unspecified way. Significantly, in the riddle text itself, the four descriptive elements are presented additively, without temporal juncture; the riddle is not in itself a narrative. In recounting the explication of the riddle to the king and his knights, though, the riddle is narrativized, Jack's presentation of the descriptive elements and the accompanying explanatory actions following one upon the other. Here, then, the structure of the compound riddle question determines the structure of the ensuing narrative: first descriptive element followed by answer/explication, followed by second descriptive element plus answer/explication, and so on. It is worth noting that the function of the riddle in accomplishing a status inversion between Jack and the king resonates nicely with the inversions that make up the constituent enigmas of the riddle—namely, reversing the spatial relations of the earth and leaves in relation to human space and inverting birth and death.

In summary, then, the riddle is narrativized in three ways. First, it is simply presented as a riddle, inset into the narrative action as quoted speech, preserving its full formal integrity. Second, it is explicated for the audience by recounting the actions by which Jack has laid the groundwork for the riddle in the order in which those actions were carried out, a sequence different from the way in which the respective descriptive elements based on those actions are presented in the riddle. Finally, after the king and his retainers fail to guess the answer, Jack disassembles the riddle descriptive element by descriptive element, following each line of the riddle with its referent-cum-explication as he embodies the enigma. The interactional structure of the riddle encounter spans that portion of the tale from the posing of the riddle to the unsuccessful attempt of the king and his knights to guess the answer to Jack's revelation and explication of the answer to the royal entourage.

The Bases of a Blended Genre

Now that we have examined closely the ways in which riddles and other enigmatic questioning routines are integrated with folktales in our two texts, we may ask what this analysis might suggest in more general terms about the resultant blending. Stated in other terms, what might be the grounds for suggesting that riddle-tales constitute

a secondary genre in Bakhtin's terms? Two texts from a single narrator cannot constitute a basis for the comprehensive designation of generic conventions, but they can help us to identify in a preliminary way some of the lines along which further analytic and comparative work might fruitfully be pursued.

To begin with, our two texts suggest some of the motivations for the blending of folktales with riddles and other enigmatic interrogative routines. The first salient point, bearing on what enigmatic routines might offer to folktales as an expressive resource, is that such routines highlight, intensify, and formalize interactional skill and the cleverness that underlies it. As we have noted, both the ability to come up with an unanswerable enigma and the ability to solve an apparently unanswerable enigma represent displays of interactional skill and are thus exercises of interactional power. Given the thematic prominence in the *Märchen* and novella of status reversal, the triumph of the lowly hero and his or her accession to high status in the face of resistance by those of higher power and status, riddles and related forms offer themselves as mechanisms for the accomplishment of the transformation.

On the one hand, they offer a contrast to institutionally grounded power, the counterposition of institutional and interactional power providing the tension that drives the tale. In addition, however, riddles and related enigmatic forms rest centrally on transformative tropes, such as metaphor, metonymy, personification, inversion, punning, and the like. These devices disguise or conceal the referents of the routines, the answers that must be provided, obscuring the relationship between appearance and reality. In like manner, the *Märchen* and novella also characteristically turn on disjunctions between appearance and reality, especially in regard to *dramatis personae* who are not what they seem to be, of whom the unpromising hero or heroine is only one manifestation. Still further, the enigmatic routines may themselves be functionally transformed in the course of the narrative, as in the first text, where Jack treats the king's questions as more riddle-like than they were intended, in order to answer them successfully. Thus, the enigmatic routines provide an effective symbolic correlative to basic thematic business in the folktales—as transformational forms in the service of a transformation of status and as forms that problematize the relationship between appearance and reality in the service of other generic forms that do likewise. And all of these functions are merged, of course, when the hero or heroine is made to embody the enigma that brings the contest of interactional power to a climax, as occurs in both of Andrew Stewart's narratives. At these points, the enigmatic routines and the folktale are fully integrated.

Given the functional compatibility of the riddle and the folktale, in terms of the ways in which riddles lend themselves to the fulfilment of significant thematic and plot conventions of the *Märchen* and novella, how is the blending of the genres accomplished in formal terms? The two narratives we have examined evince a range of possibilities for the narrativization of the riddle.

At the most basic level, the dialogic question-answer structure that constitutes the core of the riddle is inherently sequential and thus lends itself naturally to narrative. A simple recounting of the question-and-answer riddle exchange constitutes a minimal narrative in its own right. The core structure, of course, may be elaborated on by recounting additional constituent acts of the riddling encounter, such as unsuccessful guesses followed by provision and explication of the answer by the poser of the enigma, and so on, as exemplified in both texts we have examined. Still fur-

ther, the interactional sequence of the riddling encounter may receive additional narrative extension by repetition, through the multiplication of the number of riddling exchanges recounted, typically by threes as in our first text. In a related manner, when the riddle consists of multiple descriptive elements, as in the second text, the presentation and explication of the referents lends itself to narrative sequencing as well. It should be noted here that the recounting of the riddling interaction is subject to further transformation, for example, by spreading the full sequence out across successive narrated events, as in our first tale, where the first posing of the enigmas and the provision and explication of the answers are separated by a year and a day, but the interactional structure of the riddling exchange remains a structuring element in the construction of the overall narrative.

At another level, the enigma may be narrativized—and the folktale “riddlized”—by basing the riddle or other enigmatic form on some enabling narrative action. There are several possibilities here. In the first text, for example, Jack’s disguising of himself as the miller transforms him into the embodied solution to the king’s third enigmatic question. In the second text, the process is more complex. Here, Jack’s actions in killing his father’s mare, removing her unborn foal, making a whip of her hide, and concealing dirt in his hat and oak leaves in his shoes constitute the basis of his compound riddle.

A final dimension of the generic blending of enigmatic routines and folktales may be approached by examining how the resultant forms operate in overall functional terms. At various points in this chapter, I have laid out a range of grounds for considering our two textual examples essentially as folktales that encompass enigmatic interrogational routines. There are three points, however, at which the storytelling gives way momentarily to what we might call a breakthrough into riddling. One such breakthrough is manifested in the second text by the explication of the riddle to the storytelling audience in terms of the actions by which Jack has set up the four parts of the riddle. From a functional perspective, this explication is what would occur in a riddling event at just this point: after the riddle has been posed and the riddlee(s) have been unable to answer it. Here, the posing of the riddle and the failure to answer are reported as part of the narrated event. But Stewart’s audience has also heard the riddle and—we may well assume—tried unsuccessfully to puzzle it out. They, like the king and his retainers, will want to know the answer. What Stewart does, then, in his explication, is to give priority to his audience’s curiosity, transforming the narrative event momentarily into a riddling event before returning his discourse to the narrated event. Then, at the very end of both texts, Stewart offers his own evaluation of Jack’s riddling prowess (“And it was very clever, wasn’t it?” and “It’s very good, isn’t it?”), which again reframes the situation as a riddling event. That is to say, Stewart’s performance is generically hybrid at the most general functional level—basically storytelling, but with breakthroughs into riddling.

Thus, we return again to the initial enigmatic question with which we began: What is the riddle-tale in generic terms? Close examination of two sample texts has given us at least parts of the answer: sometimes folktale, sometimes riddle, largely a complex fusion of the two. The full specification of the defining features of the riddle-tale as a secondary genre will ultimately require extension of the analysis to a larger and more comprehensive sample of texts.

Notes

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1. Bødker 1964: 7.

2. "The neck-riddle is . . . so named because it is embedded within the tale of the prisoner who saves his neck by propounding a riddle which his executioner cannot answer. Characteristically, these riddles are proposed by an actor within the story and relate to events which have happened to him or which he has seen and are therefore insoluble to anyone who has not witnessed the events described" (Abrahams 1980: 8–9).

3. Norton 1942: 27; see also Abrahams 1985.

4. Lüthi 1976; Dorst 1983; Abrahams 1985.

5. Bakhtin 1986: 2, 60.

6. Bauman 1991; Hanks 1987.

7. The Scottish travelers, so called because of their formerly nomadic or seminomadic way of life, traditionally earned their living on the margins of society as metal workers (thus the pejorative term "tinker"), peddlers, beggars, horse and automobile traders, dealers in scrap, and performers. They have been justly celebrated by folklorists as superb singers and storytellers. On traveler society and culture, see Henderson 1971; Neat 1978; and Rehfisch and Rehfisch 1975. On the Stewart family, see Douglas 1981; 1987; MacColl and Seeger 1986; and Porter 1985.

8. Thompson 1961: 320–321, 324–325.

9. See Briggs 1970: 485–487, 501.

10. AT 922 (Thompson 1961). Motifs H541.2 Riddle propounded on pain of loss of property; H561.2 King and abbot; King propounds three riddles to abbot to answer on pain of death; herdsman disguises as abbot and answers questions; H691.1.1 How much does the moon weigh? A pound, for it has four quarters; H702.1.1 How many stars in the heavens? Two million; if you don't believe it, count them yourself; H524.1 What am I thinking?; H508.2 Bride offered to man who can find answer to question; J1116 Foolish person becomes clever; L160 Success of the unpromising hero (Thompson 1955–1958). For other published versions told by relatives of Andrew Stewart, see Douglas 1987: 83–84 and MacColl and Seeger 1986: 114–117.

11. AT 927 (Thompson 1961). Motifs H900 Tasks imposed; H548 Riddle contests; H792 Riddle of the unborn (Thompson 1955–1958). Abrahams 1980: 28–34.

12. See Toolan 1988 and the references therein.

13. See Douglas 1987: 9.

14. Goldstein 1963.

15. Ibid.

16. Abrahams and Dundes 1972: 130.

17. Taylor 1951.

18. Pepicello and Green 1984: 88.

19. Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Goody 1978.

20. Goody 1978: 23.

21. Kõngäs-Maranda 1971.
22. See Goffman 1974: 89; Bauman 1986: 36.
23. Olrik 1965.
24. Dorst 1983.
25. See Taylor 1951: nos. 35, 38, 89, 92, 97, 100, etc.
26. Burns 1976.

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II

HEBREW RIDDLES

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5

Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle

DAN PAGIS

Rules of the Game

Every proper riddle must fulfill two conditions: the first is its social function as a competition between the riddler and riddlees; the second is its literary form, which must be difficult and enigmatic, yet containing the clues needed to decipher it.

Each of these conditions, the social and literary, is necessary, yet not sufficient. Only the combination of the two creates a true riddle. In other words, a riddle is only that text which is intended to function as a riddle—a text whose author, or later riddler, deliberately presents it to the reader as a challenge; and, naturally, a riddle is a text able to function as a riddle, a text suited to being a challenge, encoded through various devices, but still soluble through the hints it contains and, through logical deductions, by virtually any addressee, unlike codes in other realms of life. The constant interrelationship between the practical and the textual side is essential to the riddle as a literary genre; this relationship is evident in many ways.

The social function of the riddle is expressed in the riddling situation—the contest between the riddler, who may also be the author, and the addressee (reader or listener), who tries to solve the riddle. This contest differs from the meeting between author (or performer) and reader (or listener) in other literary genres. There, too, the reader must decode the text—understand it and form an impression of it; but even though the text is more transparent than the riddle, the reader's degree of understanding never comes into question. In the riddling situation, on the other hand, he is asked not only to solve the riddle but also to make public the solution, and—if the riddle is long and entangled—to interpret it in detail.

Thus we can discern the outlines of a generic model for the poetic characteristics of the riddle. Fundamental to this model are the relationship between its social and textual aspects, the participants in the riddling process (riddler/author, riddlee), the formal components (concealing versus revealing statements, and the combina-

tion of the latter as opposed to solution and interpretation) and the boundaries of the genre (true riddles versus non-true ones).

Still, the model needs to be expanded, its theoretical basis widened (according to Speech Act Theory, for example) to explain the interrelationship and correspondence between the riddle's formulations and its social performances. The large corpus of Hebrew emblem riddles (*hidot-tsurah-ve-lo'ez*) poses a particular challenge in that area: there exist numerous contextualized accounts of how these riddles were used in society, and careful analysis of them is likely to strengthen the model.

These special riddles were cast in a complex and unique mold: each one is clearly divided into two sections. Each riddle is headed with an enigmatic emblem (copper etching, woodcut, ink drawing, watercolor, or collage) or verbal description of the picture. This was known by the technical term *tsurat ha-hidah* (צורת החידה) or *tsiyyur ha-hidah* (ציור החידה), even when in verbal form. The emblem does not reveal the solution, but rather conceals it, using graphic or semantic devices. After the enigmatic picture comes the main part or "body" of the riddle, a poem in meter and rhyme, occasionally in the medieval monorhymed pattern of Hebrew-Spanish provenance, but more often in more modern strophic Italian form—sonnetto, ottava rima, terza rima, quartina, and so on. This section varied in length, expanding at times to 200 lines, and is a dramatic monologue in which the riddle's subject, personified, cryptically described itself in paradoxical imagery, allusions and other devices, some of them traditional (such as apparently contradictory entities, *gematria* [meaning derived from the numerical values of Hebrew letters] and *notariqon* [meaning derived from initials of separate words]), as well as modern innovations.

Conspicuous among these were bilingual puns, called *ha-lo'ez* (הלועז), based on an interplay of bilingual homonyms and synonyms: the key words denoting the riddle's solution were inserted in the Hebrew text of the body in Italian or Spanish translation, but disguised as another Hebrew word which happened to sound like it. For example, if the poem's solution were "sun," in Spanish *sol*, the *lo'ez* might appear in a line reading "In the east *li sol hamesilah* (pave me a road)" or even with an explicit hint at the place the key word is concealed: "In the east, from a foreign people (*me'am lo'ez*, בעם לועז)." Similar novel devices based on Aramaic and Hebrew key words concealed in the poem were called *arami* and *'ivri*; in the same riddle about the sun, for example, is the line *kach ashamesh yom-yom et ha'ivri* (כך אשמש יום-יום את אשמש כד) (lit., "So shall I serve the *ivri* [Hebrew] day by day"). In allusions such as these, the author plays at hide and seek. He teases the riddlee: there now, I've given him the solution and hinted at where it is hidden—let's see if he can find it!

The emblem and body of the riddle are the two basic components of this subgenre, which can be formed from them alone. But most riddles are more complex in structure, including additional parts with technical names of their own: motto (*me'orer*), *mafteah* (key), *pitron ha-hidah* (the riddle's solution). The latter was in fact also an enigmatic part which had to be decoded, resulting in "the solution's solution." These parts, like the emblem, are distinct from the body of the riddle in rhyme and formulation. But the two principal features of this subgenre remain the components mentioned above—the emblematic picture and the *lo'ez*. Their names appear in the riddle as familiar technical terms which, for the contemporary reader, need no explanation.

These special riddles were so popular that they were simply called *hidot* (riddles), although other types of riddles were widespread at the time as well. R. Moshe Hayyim

Luzzatto (RaMHaL) (1707–1747) devoted an entire chapter of his book on poetics, *Leshon limudim*, to the genre of riddles (in a suppressed version written in 1724 and published only in 1951). There he distinguished between riddles he called “short”—probably implying more types—and “long,” composed of an emblematic picture as well as the *lo’ez*. Both devices, the picture and the *lo’ez*, are explained in detail; therefore the term *long riddle* apparently refers to this particular form, not merely to its length, which in fact does not distinguish it from other forms.¹

The Social Setting of the Riddle

Folklorists have investigated various riddling situations, but usually considered them only as public occasions for the performance of folk riddles, and usually as background to understanding how these folk riddles are created and function in human life.² Our own interest—the literary riddle—requires us to expand these findings and adapt them to different conditions.

In the domain of the folk riddle, the archetypal riddling situation is a public forum, where there is a direct meeting between the riddler and the audience of riddlees; nevertheless, contrary to common belief, it may also take place in solitude or in writing: since the invention of the printing press, many folk riddles have been handed down from generation to generation in books written for the entertainment of individuals and families, and not necessarily as a public ceremony. The case is slightly different (though certainly not the opposite) in the domain of the literary riddle. The archetypal riddling situation here is in private, where the individual reader contends with riddles transmitted in writing; but here as well—again, contrary to common belief—the public riddling situation was quite popular, and in some eras even predominant: hundreds of Hebrew emblem poems from Italy and Holland (which are undeniably literary, as is evident from their length, style, erudition, sophistication, and complex structure) were composed for competitions staged according to specific guidelines for various public festivities. Such occasions arose even in learned “academies”—founded by groups of poets, musicians, and cultured individuals interested, among other things, in such riddles—as early as the seventeenth century and particularly in the eighteenth.

As far as the riddling situation is concerned, then, the major difference between the two realms is not the way the riddles are transmitted (orally or in writing, in public or private) but rather the position of the riddler: for the folk riddle, he is primarily a transmitter presenting traditional material, with his own additions and changes; while in the literary, “learned” realm, the riddler is the author himself, who reserves the same rights over his own riddles as over his other works. The writer who transforms an overt text into a riddle acts in the same manner as an author (see below, “Genre Metamorphoses: To the Riddle and Back”).

Every riddle contains two parts of unequal length: the encoded text and revealed solution. These parts are opposites that seek to unite, thus eliminating the tension of opposition between them. The riddle, however, exists for the sake of that very tension, which reflects the social tension, the contest between riddler and riddlee. The division in two is thus textual as well as social; the encoded text is presented to the riddlee, while the solution remains hidden with the riddler until the riddlee dis-

covers it by himself, or until he gives up the game. When he finds the solution and adds it to the text, the tension dissolves and the text ceases to be a riddle. The moment the riddle is completed, it also ceases to exist.

The riddling situation of the literary riddle is thus founded on an agreement between riddler and riddlee. The author is obliged to pose a riddle tantalizing in its opacity, yet fair in the clues it provides. The riddlee is obliged to solve the riddle, to announce the solution and to explain the author's intent with reference to the clues. Rules for the contestants addressing emblem-riddles state that the riddlee is required to interpret at least all the major hints.

This agreement lasts until the end of the game, when both opponents must announce the cessation of the contest between them. The riddlee announces a solution and substantiates it by explaining the details; the author, formerly the riddler, confirms that the declared solution is correct—that is, that it corresponds to his intention. All this applies in the solitary riddling situation as well. As we have said, even then the author is present in spirit, and often has already confirmed, or discounted, the suggestion of the later reader by leaving him the correct solution in an agreed-on hiding place—at the end of the book or in inverted writing at the bottom of the page, and so on; the reader checks there to see if he has indeed solved the riddle correctly. Of course, if the reader is impatient, she can peek right away; if she is bored, she may skip the riddle completely. In those two cases, the readers simply do not take part in the game, do not enter the riddling situation, and, of course, miss out on the pleasure of deciphering—like readers of a detective novel who surreptitiously turn to the end or, in another sense, spectators who leave the theater in the middle of a play or decide not to watch it at all. But readers who participate in the game abide by the rules in the private riddling situation as well. If they solve the riddle correctly, they satisfy their desire to uncover what was concealed or to complete what was lacking, or they demonstrate their cleverness and savor their victory over the riddler; in a public contest they earn a prize as well.³

The psychological motivations are not relevant to our discussion, which concerns the nature of the genre, but they are very obvious in reality. It was considered a great honor to win a prize in a riddling contest, and even more important than the prestige and reward was the satisfaction derived from deciphering, whether of a contemporary or of an inherited text. Indeed, the challenge may have been most strongly felt in the confrontation between an earlier riddler and a much later riddlee, and then the joy of decoding was particularly pronounced.

Basic Literary Shape: The Balance between Encoding and Decoding

As we have said, the literary form of the riddle is fundamentally linked to its social function. It must be couched in proper poetic form adequate to the challenge inherent in the riddling situation. The adequacy of the text is revealed in a particular balance between lucidity and obscurity; the encoding ensures that the text will be both enigmatic and soluble. This balance has no predetermined measure; it depends on the background of the riddlee and other varying factors, as we will see; its existence allows the challenge to be posed.

The text's encoding, required by the condition relating to obscurity, can be achieved by several methods, each including its own specific devices. Let us consider three of those methods, which differ as to their respective objects: method A conceals the subject itself; method B conceals the name of the subject; and method C conceals directives toward approaching yet another method of encoding—that is, it enigmatically suggests how the reader can decipher another part of the same riddle. These three methods also differ in their devices of encoding.

Method A conceals the essence and characteristics of the subject by a strange or fantastic description based on seeming antitheses; on a reversal of the accepted order in society or in nature, such as a paradox of hierarchy (weak yet stronger than the strong; ignoble yet more precious than the most honored); on an inversion of time or space (an old man yet unborn; a small vessel with infinite volume); on the negation of a natural or common state (speaks without a mouth, runs without legs, or, even more paradoxically, runs without legs yet overtakes all runners, and so on). The description may be founded on images that are strange in and of themselves, with no apparent contradiction, and thus some folklorists distinguish between oppositional riddles and nonoppositional ones.⁴ Hebrew literary riddles that describe the nature of the subject (as opposed to its name, as a word), particularly favor apparent contradictions (one side of the opposition is a metaphor, the other in simple language; or both are metaphors). Using a selection of Hebrew riddles from Spain, Tova Rosen-Moked has demonstrated various kinds of opposition, including the hierarchical, causal, temporal and spatial.⁵ Many of the short riddles are based solely on a framework of apparent contradictions:

What weeps without eye or eyelid, her tears rejoicing sons and fathers—
And when she laughs and no tears fall, her laughter saddens all hearts?—A
cloud.⁶

Other riddles are founded both on contradictions and on strange images without opposition:

What bird vomits blackness . . . weak and yet a hero . . . etc.?—The pen.⁷

Complex compositions like emblem riddles hint at the nature of the subject by using devices such as these as well as allusions to traditional sources, literary or theoretical; they may also hint at the name of the subject (according to method B), but apparent metaphorical oppositions always play an important role in them.

In method B, encoding the name of the subject, the solution is a word (usually used in word-riddles or sections of complex riddle-poems). The encoding in this method is achieved by the devices of calculating the numerical value of letters or combining letters and syllables (*gematria* and *notariqon*, as well as other well-known devices such as the logograph, palindrome, and anagram), and by devices of semantic and morphological polysemy, some of them metalinguistic. The author sometimes signals, within the text, that he has hidden a *gematria* or *notariqon*, but even this signal may be concealed by an ambiguous sign or a combination of methods; he may, for example, signify the Hebrew letter “כ” (*kaf*) as the palm of the hand based on the homonym of the name of the letter and of the word “palm” (*kaf-yad*), as an instrument, *keli* (both words beginning with that letter), as the number 20 (the numerical value of כ) or 100 (the numerical value of the letter's name 20 + 80 = קכ).

One favorite tactic is even more encoded and yet more familiar: signifying letters by suggesting their names as independent words (ע = *ayin*, eye; ב = *bayit*, house) or the shape of the letter (“set your eye upon the fork”—put the letter *ayin* on the letter *shin*, which is shaped like a three-pronged fork, forming the word *ash*, moth; the riddle continues to form the name Asael).⁸ Special appellations for certain letters became familiar, such as *dag*, fish, for the letter *nun* (*nun* = fish in Aramaic).

Rosen-Moked has studied “polysemous operations with letters in riddles whose solutions are names,”⁹ and we may add that in emblem-riddles, letter manipulations are used for every concealed element, since these riddles always combine method A (nature of the subject) and method B (name of the subject). But there is yet another primary device focused on the name of the subject as a word, which has not received the attention it deserves. That is a metalinguistic twist: the key-word is inserted in the text as if it were referential like the other words—that is, as if it referred to the matter being described; in fact, it also has a metalinguistic role, referring to itself as a word composed of letters.

In this sort of technique, the keyword is usually inserted in altered form but accompanied by instructions to the riddlee. Here is an example, ascribed to Yehuda Halevi (1075–1141): How is the name hidden from you and yet visible (*nir’eh*)? Place the second half first and reverse the first.¹⁰

The word *nir’eh* (נִרְאֶה, visible) is beautifully suited to the game: it is, first, properly referential—look, the name is visible, it is here before you—but it is metalinguistic as well, turning on itself as a word, and that, in fact, is the point: the visible name is the word *nir’eh* itself, but with its letters inverted. Place the second half first (אֶה) and reverse the first half (רִי) and you have אֶהֱרִי, Aaron. Even if the reader suspects he is contending with this kind of device, he still may not guess what the key-word is.

This metalinguistic device is popular in many languages. An Italian riddle from the sixteenth century reads *io sol vaglio in potenza* (I alone have great strength), and the hint is *io. . . sol* (I . . . the sun).¹¹ A lyrical poem by Cervantes ends with the words *decidme que es cosa y cosa* (tell me what is one thing and another). The solution is the concept “riddle,” included in the words themselves—*cosa y cosa*—a common term for the riddle.¹²

Emblem riddles have a particular affinity to metalinguistic games, which may take place on as many as three levels.

1. The solution word is woven into the text as a referential word, as in the examples here, but it may be hidden in a variety of places, including even the prefatory dedication, which is not usually encoded. In an eighteenth-century Hebrew emblem riddle (anonymous, but perhaps penned by the poet Jacob Daniel Olmo [ca. 1690–1757, Ferrara]) the long dedication begins with a quotation of a biblical verse, “I hear the voice that shouts for mastery, the noise of those who sing do I hear” (after Ex. 32:18), and the body of the poem begins, “An echo calls me, indeed I hear;” the answer: echo, literally, daughter of a voice (*bat-qol*).¹³

The device of incidental insertion is especially interesting in riddles whose solution is the concept (and the word) “riddle” or “secret.” This solution word, when inserted in the riddle, always appears to be referential: the reader is con-

vinced it signifies the genre of the poem, as usual in literary riddles on a variety of subjects: "And here, a riddle," "find a secret" etc.; in this case, however, it also points to itself, to the solution word "riddle" or "secret."

Moshe Zacuto (Amsterdam 1625–Mantua 1697) opens his riddle *Ilemet anokhi* with the words, "If a man is bewildered by a secret sealed / He should learn the concealed from the concealed."¹⁴ The reader assumes the word "secret" refers to the riddle as a genre, but here the word also implies that the solution of this riddle is the "secret." This game is especially witty: if you are bewildered by a sealed secret, by the solution, deduce what is concealed (i.e., the encoded solution, here: secret) from the concealed, from the lines of the poem itself, which mention the "secret" explicitly. (Those lines were not enough to satisfy Zacuto, and he inserted the solution word a few more times in the same sort of veiled allusion.)

2. Another level of metalinguistic play common in emblem riddles is the device termed *'ivri* (lit. Hebrew): here the solution word is inserted in the course of the poem as in the examples we have already seen, but the author signals their location by inconspicuously invoking the technical term *'ivri*. For example, in the following riddle in which the solution is the Hebrew word for wine, *yayin*: "My power will please like a song of God (*ukezimrat yah yin'am 'uzi*) and the Hebrew people love me (*gam 'am 'ivri oti yohav*)."¹⁵ *Yah yin'am / yahyin / yayin*, wine. The term *'ivri* points to the special form of encoding. In order to keep the solution from becoming too obvious, authors sometimes chose to split the word *'ivri*, distributing it over a few neighboring words, to invert its letters, or to join it with the *lo'ez*.
3. A third level of metalinguistic play is bilingual as well: the device of *lo'ez*, or foreign-language word. The Hebrew word representing the solution is embedded in the poem, but translated into Italian or Spanish (or Portuguese); its location in the poem is usually signaled by the technical term *lo'ez*, in the same way the term *'ivri* is used. This tendency to mix two languages, which goes back to medieval poetry, is typical of the Baroque, which enjoyed polyglot games of all sorts; Hebrew literature was also attracted to such play. Combinations like these were not necessarily devices of encoding and can be found in many overt genres, such as macaronic poetry—where every strophe, or even every line, mixes two or three languages. A Mannerist device takes this tendency to the extreme: instead of merely juxtaposing two languages, one was actually superimposed on the other; a kind of phonetic transformation then allowed the text to be understood in both languages simultaneously—in each case, of course, by dividing the syllables differently, the result being a different meaning. This device was sometimes used in small units, such as bilingual echo rhymes ("What is in hell and yearns for the sea? [*mah zeh betofet ve-yikhsuf yama*] the answer: *fiamma* [flame])."¹⁶ At other times, it pervades entire compositions, as in humoristic poems or epithalamiums, or even dirges and eulogies. It is indeed a typically Baroque phenomenon: poets saw no contradiction between a highly artificial device and the seriousness of the subject and tone of the poem. Thus the first simultaneous bilingual (Italian-Hebrew) poem was a dirge written by Leon (Yehuda Arie) Modena (Venice, 1571–1648) on the death of his rabbi, in "Hebrew and Christian ottava" form (1584), which

opens with the following homonymous sequence: *Chi nasce muor. Oi mè che pass' acerbo*. (Everything that is born dies. Oh, how bitter is the sorrow.) *Qinna shemor, Oy ma ki-pas otsar bo*. ("Keep mourning, for [with his death] a treasure has been lost.")¹⁷

In riddles, the *lo'ez* is founded on the same principle, but with a singular variation linked to its function. In a bilingual poem, the device is obvious and continuous; indeed, it is actually meant to impress the audience by its openness. It depends on a parallelism between two texts whose connection is exclusively phonetic: the two sound the same, but their meaning is different in each language; they function essentially as separate systems of bilingual homonyms. The *lo'ez*, on the other hand, is limited to a single word; this word is hidden, while its connection to the poetic riddle is twofold—both phonetic and semantic. Phonetically, the *lo'ez* is identical to a Hebrew word that happens to appear in the poem, while its meaning corresponds to another Hebrew word not explicitly present in the poem, yet serving as its object—the sought-after solution. Thus the *lo'ez* functions both as a bilingual homonym, for example *pele'* (miracle) / *pelle* (skin in Italian) and as a bilingual synonym (*pelle*—'or, skin in Hebrew).

The latter function is simple and self-evident, for the bilingual synonym is none other than the foreign language keyword and its Hebrew equivalent, with nothing enigmatic about it. Still this stage is necessary and inseparable from the whole system. We must emphasize that the solution of a Hebrew riddle of this type is embodied in a Hebrew word—for every such riddle, as we have seen, is both a subject riddle and a word riddle; that is, it contains clues pointing both to a particular subject and to the Hebrew name of that subject (the Hebrew word and its various combinations of letters).

There are five or six extant emblem riddles of this type in other languages (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese), written by Jewish poets for public contests; in these riddles the *lo'ez* works, of course, in the opposite direction—the Hebrew keyword is veiled by a non-Hebrew word evoked in the course of the foreign language poem.¹⁸

Authors sometimes made things harder for the riddlee by leaving out any mention of the term *lo'ez* in the body of the poem, thus hiding the location of the device. Matters could be rendered yet more difficult by not even inserting the keyword itself, the poet merely alluding to it via a separate word. This technique is a sort of "concealed *lo'ez*" which required the reader to decipher an additional Hebrew synonym even before he reached the bilingual system. For example, in the riddle *Miyom nivra 'olam* by Jacob Vita Israel (Amsterdam, mid-eighteenth century), the hidden speaker says, "My friend in the hills, I say to you / If you ask Shlomo he will reveal it to your ears / Ask Esther as well, go then to / Seek, and find me among her perfumes."¹⁹ Shlomo and Esther are the couple in whose honor the riddle was composed. "In the hills" alludes to Mt. Moriah (*har hamor*); "among her perfumes" (*tamruqeha*) is *hamor*, myrrh; thus, in accordance with their pronunciation, we are led to *Amor*, love. The word *omar* (I say) suggests the solution as well, inverting its vowels. The basic mechanism of the "concealed *lo'ez*" is as in Table 5-1.

Even more strange is the *lo'ez* in Moshe Zacuto's poem "*Bi sakh shnei avot*" [In me, the sum of two fathers],²⁰ on the number six. In this instance, the poet takes ad-

vantage of a rare phenomenon. In their pronunciation (which made no distinction between the right-dotted letter *ṣ* [/sh/] and the left-dotted *ṣ* [/s/]), the Hebrew word *shesh* (six) sounds like the Spanish *seis*, which in fact means six! In this case the *lo'ez* is thus the 'ivri as well: the homonym is also a bilingual synonym. Perhaps Zacuto thought this relation was too obvious; in any case, he complicated the *lo'ez* by refraining from including the words *shesh* (or *seis*), suggesting it instead in a serpentine series of hints. The personified number six is the speaker who presents himself in the poem; he mentions "half of me," i.e., three, *shalosh*. After playing with the word "three" he says of his name: "If you take away the middle letter, / Ask yourselves its *lo'ez*." In other words: omit the letter lamed from the word *shalosh* and you are left with *sha-sh*, and by changing the vowel from a *kamatz* to a *tsere* (here he gives another hint), you will get *shesh*—*seis* (six). In this riddle as well, Zacuto gives no indication that the *lo'ez* itself is in fact also the Hebrew solution. Nearly all the stages of decoding are thus hidden, from the "half of me" to the Hebrew *shesh*: "half of me" / [shalosh] / [shash] / [shesh = ses] / [seis] / [shesh] six.

Method C is a sort of metamethod: it refers to other methods of deciphering included in the same riddle and offers the reader guidance on how he is supposed to decode another section—for example, as a metaphor or a *gematria*. Such methodological suggestions need not be completely encoded. On the contrary, sometimes the author almost openly announces the method or device he has chosen in the adjacent section. But often he conceals the directives as well, and the reader must overcome yet another obstacle and realize that certain phrases do not refer to the subject, but hint rather at other hints. If, for instance, he must reverse the letters of the hidden keyword, this could be hinted at by a sentence like *hafokh bah vahafokh bah dekula bah*, "Turn it over and over, for it contains everything" (Avot. 5:22, referring to the study of the Torah); the familiar meaning of this Talmudic dictum is inverted, and the metaphorical "turning over" is restored to its literal sense. This method is very popular in emblem riddles and is applied even toward devices such as the *lo'ez*. At times, the poet reveals its hiding place in the text by inserting the word *lo'ez*; at other times, this is suggested by another concealed hint—device piled on device. The same is true in the *tsurah* section: the emblem and the motto accompanying the riddle usually allude to the subject, but they can also suggest the decoding approach required in the body of the riddle or other parts of the structure.

All encoding devices create a disparity between the subject and its description (by metaphor, fallacious assumption, etc.) or among the components of the description itself (apparent antithesis, etc.) or between different levels of meaning (semantic,

Table 5-1 The "concealed *lo'ez*" in *Miyom nivra 'olam*

1	2 (hidden <i>lo'ez</i>)	3 (hidden <i>lo'ez</i>)	4
"In the hills"	[/hamor/]	[Amor]	[love]
"Among the perfumes"—			
hidden synonyms (Hebrew)		hidden homonyms (Hebrew-foreign language)	hidden synonyms (foreign language- Hebrew)

morphological, metalinguistic, etc.) Rosen-Moked has categorized such disparities as they appear in lyrical riddles of medieval Spain.²¹ The Baroque emblem riddles composed in Italy and Holland introduced novel devices, naturally creating new disparities: for example, between a graphic picture (the *tsurah*, or emblem) and the subject or elements of its description; or between levels of meaning in Hebrew and another language, through a system of hidden homonyms and synonyms (the device of *lo'ez*). But the author must always take care to enable the riddlee to bridge every gap, to link disparate parts; and that obligation brings us to the other side of encoding—its relation to decoding.

The existence of clues, required by the condition of solubility, is bound up with encoding and is accomplished mainly by the same devices: except for special techniques that are deliberately misleading, every encoding device is also a way to provide hints; in other words, it offers some clue how to decode what it is itself encoding. Here lies the difference between textual encoding in the riddle and any cipher used in the real world. Military, commercial, and industrial codes (secret systems of writing) naturally lack the element of play. There the encoded text is meant to be decoded by one particular addressee and to be completely incomprehensible to anyone else. The addressee deciphers the text not logically but technically, using some predetermined calculation, prepared charts, or other aids. The text of the riddle, on the other hand, is founded on a power struggle between what is concealed and what is hinted; and it is meant to be resolved, in the end, from within its own terms. The play in the text between concealing and conveying information is one of the defining qualities of the riddle and reflects the play between riddler and riddlee in the riddling situation.²²

The necessary balance between obscurity and lucidity obliges riddle authors to show some compassion for their opponents—up to a point. As a counterweight to the text's encoding, authors provide the appropriate quality and quantity of clues. They may even make life easier for readers by giving them more hints than necessary.

Balancing Quality of Hints

All the hints must correspond to the nature and outstanding qualities of the subject, or to its name as revealed by the combination of its letters. Arbitrary hints, endemic to clever questions, are invalid in the true riddle. "In me green became gold"—such a hint is appropriate to a riddle about wheat, but not about a coat, for example, for the colors of a coat are essentially accidental, perhaps red or blue. Of course, a very close connection to the hidden subject may make deciphering too easy; the boundaries of appropriate encoding and hinting are highly flexible, sometimes approaching the arbitrary limit already mentioned. In the paradoxical images of the riddle it is common practice to describe an inanimate object as dead, blind, or deaf (as if it, or another like it, could really live, see, or hear):

Blind yet with an eye in his head, naked yet clothing the naked—A needle.

Dead and buried unclothed, yet in death giving birth to many that are clothed—A grain of wheat (the grains are clothed with chaff).

In the Middle Ages no one had trouble understanding such apparent contradictions (see encoding method A) created by combining metaphors, metonymies, and

literal expressions; they were popular both in riddles and, with a different function, in overt descriptive poems.

The area of maneuver, though very large, is restricted on two counts. Just as a distant or arbitrary hint is too obscure and violates the condition of reasonable solubility, an overly detailed or self-evident hint violates the condition of reasonable opacity because it demands no effort and prevents the reader's active involvement in the game. If a riddle about a pen (reed or quill) reads "a mute bird, who rejoices in drinking blood," the second hint is too obscure and arbitrary (ink may be red, but it may equally be blue, etc.). If it reads "a mute bird, who rejoices in drinking ink," the second hint is too obvious. The right balance might be struck, as in "a mute bird, who rejoices on the shore of the 'Shihor'—and if the author thinks the word 'Shihor,' denoting the Nile, is too close to the black (*shahor*) of ink, he may add another obstacle: "rejoicing on the shores of the Nile," along with other hints found in numerous riddles about the pen.

Though a clue may seem arbitrary in a later period, it was surely appropriate in its own time. In a riddle only recently published, Yehuda Halevi describes the needle as, among other things, "black" beauty, because in the eleventh and twelfth centuries needles were made of metal that blackened easily.²³

The shifting factors affecting encoding depend, of course, not only on historical differences but also on the level of erudition and perceptiveness of each riddlee. In the eighteenth century, many people complained of the incomprehensibility and exaggeration of the emblem riddles currently being composed, and some authors even promised not to make their riddles too difficult. A few highly complex riddles have survived, though today they seem almost hermetically sealed (even with the commentary provided by the author himself); nonetheless, some were correctly solved in their own time.

Balancing Quantity of Hints

The balance between encoding and giving hints applies to quantity as well: there should be neither too few nor too many hints. If this balance is disrupted and the text shifts to either extreme (innumerable hints, or none at all) it cannot serve as a riddle. If it reveals all, its subject is clear and needs no deciphering; if it conceals all, the subject remains invisible and cannot be deciphered, but can only be guessed blindly. Statements such as "There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not" (Proverbs 30:18), or the series of rhetorical questions in the Mishnaic tractate Avot ("Who is wise? . . . Who is strong?"—Avot, 4,1) cannot, for this reason, be riddles, contrary to the view of some scholars. They do not offer precise data which, taken together, necessarily lead to a single solution; on the contrary, endless answers are possible. These are, rather, wise sayings that open with a brief rhetorical formula and continue accordingly.

There is no restriction on the actual number of hints any riddle may contain. In long riddles, numerous clues are embedded in a variety of encoding devices and may be crowded together one after another in a single line or half-line, yet still preserve the balance—because they are sufficiently enigmatic. Of course, one overly transparent hint risks disclosing the solution and ending the game prematurely; but transparency also depends on circumstances and the competence of the riddlees.

Balancing Concealing and Revealing

The balance between concealing and revealing is a compulsory principle. The author may not subtract from the established norm, but he is allowed to add to it and alter the balance to his own disadvantage and the riddlee's advantage—just as a chess master agrees to play without an important piece to aid an amateur opponent. As we have seen, the author often weaves methodological suggestions for decoding into the body of the riddle. If he wishes to hinder the reader, he conceals these as well; but if he wishes to help him, at least a little, he offers guidance in unambiguous terms: "Put the second half first and reverse the first." Other helpful hints: "the same number of these as those;" "combine;" "omit;" "place," and so on in the case of *notariqon* and *gematria*; or "as the sages said" and similar expressions, to allude to traditional or later sources.

Some devices look deceptively helpful, but are actually meant to complicate matters. A striking example, discussed earlier, is the surreptitious insertion of the solution word. At first glance, this seems like the most blatant of hints. But readers are unaware that the word encountered in the flow of the text, even in its first lines, is in fact the solution to be taken literally; they assume it to be encoded as well. They read "echo" and it never occurs to them that the solution is "an echo." In particular, when they read an introduction saying "Here is a riddle," they never suspect this is a riddle about "the riddle" as a genre.

In emblem riddles, as we have said, authors commonly hinted at the hiding place of the foreign word in the body of the text by putting the signal word *lo'ez* somewhere nearby. This gesture was meant to aid readers, but, to avoid helping them too much, the poets usually complicated the hidden *lo'ez* itself, splitting or inverting it—thus sometimes actually making things more difficult rather than easier for the riddlee. Moreover, even when the help is genuine, there is still a sense of teasing the reader: "He is still having trouble deciphering, even though I, the author, have been unduly merciful."

The balance between encoding and giving hints can thus fluctuate between challenging and teasing, help and hindrance—all within the bounds of play agreed upon by both sides.

Secondary Literary Shape: Formulae Signaling Genre

The riddle genre is sometimes evident in the composition of the text itself through an explicit challenge or invitation to the reader to try his hand at solving it. But such an address need not be formulated as a question or command, and many riddles are written as a third-person description or monologue by a hidden narrator (such is the case, for example, in hundreds of long emblem riddles).

Let us make a short survey of formulations commonly used in the literary riddle (a few of them are related to typical formulae):

A. A question implying a challenge:

What is a tree, yet its branches are in the earth . . .

What is blind, yet has an eye in its head . . .

Do you know of a body without an arm . . .²⁴

B. An imperative connected to a question, implying a challenge:

Tell me, what looks like houses . . .
Say, who is it that answers/says . . .²⁵

C. Mention of the riddle as genre in the text:

Now I pose you a riddle . . . a castle in the dust . . .
A riddle to the noble sons I pose . . . a king in a castle . . .²⁶

In emblem-riddles this formulation is prevalent in unencoded sections (lyrical dedications, benedictions, and, in rare instances, already in the body of the riddle, after the emblem):

At this time of happiness and rejoicing I shall pose a riddle.²⁷
For you, my pleasant companions . . . a riddle.²⁸

D. An imperative which continues as a description; the imperative draws the reader's attention to a particular object.²⁹ Such a formulation is usual in overt descriptive poems and ornamental couplets (*mikhtamim*) in order to surround the revealed object with an aura of "amazement;" in riddles it refers to the hidden subject which the author, to increase dramatic tension, pretends to point out (as if to say, Tell me, what do you see?). "Behold, a short sceptre . . ."³⁰ In such riddles this appeal appears only in the introduction, followed by declarative sentences, as in the text section.

E. Propositions spoken by the observer, who describes the hidden subject in the third person (He is this or that, his actions are such and such):

A box in the form of a cube . . .
A container with no purpose . . . and it is small . . .
Sister of the sun on a dark night . . .³¹

This formulation is very popular in emblem riddles, particularly in certain sections (the *tsurah*, *mafteah*, and so on) and only occasionally in the body of the riddle itself. "A flying bird . . . strikes dead and revives . . ."³² In folk riddles or versions of folk riddles which became literary riddles, the opening phrase "I saw" sometimes appears.

F. Declarative sentences spoken by the hidden subject who describes himself in the first person in a dramatic monologue (I am this or that, these are my actions):

Clothed I emerged from my mother's womb . . .
My friend, what do you ask of me . . .
That is my name if you seek it . . .

This formulation is particularly common in the body of emblem-poems:

I am one, I am many . . .
I am a drunkard, I am a glutton . . .³³

Formulas A, B, and C are clear intratextual signals, indicating that the reader has a riddle before him, and it is up to him or her to find the solution. But formulas D, E, and F contain no such signal and might be found in other genres as well. Of course there are other kinds of textual signals in addition to syntactic formulations. Especially prominent are guides to deciphering which the author sometimes weaves

into the text. In word riddles he can hint that the reader has a *gematria* or *notariqon* to contend with, and even indicate which subtype is used. In subject riddles he can hint at the presence of a metaphor, allusion to a literary source, and so on, and in emblem riddles point to where the *lo'ez* is concealed. But what is true of imperatives holds for these other signals as well: while characteristic of the riddle, they are optional rather than obligatory, and in many riddles they do not appear at all. Strange images or paradoxes do not serve as unambiguous generic signaling; they are typical of metaphorical riddles but occur in other genres—in Spain, for example, in descriptive poems, love songs, and drinking songs.

Let us emphasize once again the linkage between social function and literary form: the text will be a riddle only if its author, or a later riddler, poses it as a challenge, placing it in a riddling situation—and of course only if the text is suited to that role, that is, if it has the main attribute of a riddle as we have portrayed it: the special balance between encoding and hinting.

Generic signals in the text are not enough. The indisputable, constant, and obligatory sign of the genre is found not inside the text but outside of it: in the context, in the riddle's social function, and in its wider textual situation. When it is used in a public riddling situation, the function of the riddle is evident; yet even when transmitted in writing, there are extratextual signs that testify to its function—for example, mentioning the title "riddle" in the dedication to honored patrons, or in the commentary attached later, or inclusion of the text in a collection of riddles.

The Solubility of the Subject

The riddle must be soluble, not only in terms of its hints but also in the nature of the subject itself. Esoteric matters, not to mention completely private ones, are exempt from being the subject, for no riddlee could discover them, even with the help of myriad hints or extraordinary perceptiveness. The subject must be general and familiar, though that quality depends on the cultural level of the audience and the range and size of this audience. An erudite and abstract subject is unsuited to a popular audience, but it is still soluble (possibly even too easily) by a more learned group. The subjects of folk riddles are universal, usually borrowed from immediate and tangible reality: nature, the family, tools, products. The literary riddle employs universal subjects as well, whether concrete or abstract (water, sun, bread, scales, wisdom, love), but it also uses more sophisticated subjects depending on the cultural milieu, period, or some particular teaching (white, in its kabbalistic sense as the *Sefira tiferet*; the grammatical *sheva*; the astrological signs; primordial matter; the Tarot cards). Some literary riddles have a familiar or local topic, understood by a small circle of people, such as the names of a bride and groom to whom the riddle is dedicated. The generality of an appropriate topic is thus subject to change, just as the nature of the hints does, depending on the audience.

Thus, in a true riddle, private matters known to the author alone are completely invalid. Such subjects are in fact common in challenges not considered proper riddles; they are integrated into fictive narratives, particularly in folktales at a turning point of the plot: the hero, imprisoned or confronted with some other danger, can

save himself if he succeeds in answering a question known only to the person asking it; at the last minute he discovers its solution. In other stories, the hero poses such a question to the enemy who has brought on his distress; the enemy does not know how to answer, and the hero is saved. Folklorists call such questions “neck riddles” (*Halslösungsrätsel*). A well-known example occurs in the story of the gnome Rumpelstiltskin, who puts the king’s wife in great distress and is willing to release her only if she guesses his bizarre name; at the last moment she succeeds.³⁴

The term neck riddle was coined only recently, but the genre, not a proper riddle, has a long history; one instance is Samson’s riddle, “Out of the eater came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness” (Judges 14:14). Some have considered this, at least in its simple sense, an unfair question, because it refers to an isolated incident known to Samson alone: the beehive and honeycomb he found in the carcass of a lion. The Philistines discovered the answer by deceit, but no one could have answered it from their own knowledge. Bible commentators and scholars, perplexed by this fact, tried to justify the riddle in different ways, for example, by claiming that it refers to a general subject as well—any lion and honey, or love, or a wedding. What is of interest to us is their loyalty to the principle that the hidden subject of any proper riddle must be familiar to the riddlees. Thus Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (RaMHaI), who treated the problem arising from Samson’s riddle, included it in his discussion of the riddle as genre and tried to interpret Samson’s words in such a way that they could be accepted as an appropriate, “proper” riddle.³⁵ Aside from its theoretical importance, Luzzatto’s discussion was instrumental in the historical development of the genre: in later generations, poets considered Samson’s riddle as the authoritative origin of the genre and as the source of the custom of posing riddles at weddings. However, they took pains in their own riddles to choose subjects well-known to the cultivated audience of their time. Hence, neck riddles seem to be absent from learned Hebrew literature; even the riddles integrated into learned stories and *maqams* (rhymed prose narratives) are usually true riddles, founded on a familiar subject. Some stories also contain clever questions that are not true riddles because they have no subject at all—and in any case their answer is a joke.

The Single Solution and the Problem of the Author’s Intent

The balance between both concealing and revealing and between author and riddlee is based on a fundamental principle: that the literary riddle has only a single correct answer, the one chosen by the author. This principle may seem self-evident, but it is open to criticism from two perspectives: folkloristics, where claims have been raised for the existence of more than one exclusive answer, and literary theory, which attempts to underscore the author’s intention in any work of literature.

Some folk riddles do have more than one solution. There are very short riddles with few clues, which according to “learned” criteria are inappropriate; they have more than one meaning accidentally, rather than intentionally. But some folklorists conjecture that this is no accident and that a multiplicity of solutions is inherent to the nature of the folk riddle and important in public riddling situations. Still, most folk riddles do really have only one solution. In any case, for literary riddles matters

are much clearer: the author is an individual, guided by a normative poetics and by his responsibility for the text's appropriateness, according to the conditions we have described; he provides readers with hints leading only to the solution he has chosen. Even older literary riddles that have met with new solutions in recent years do not violate this principle,³⁶ for the plurality of suggestions arises only from technical difficulties, such as historical distance and textual distortions, rather than from intrinsic ambiguity; an accurate manuscript or parallel source may easily solve the technical problem, uncovering the single solution intended by the author.

As for literary theory: intentionality is a general problem that has been the subject of controversy for many years. In recent decades, absolute statements rejecting the intentional fallacy have been reexamined, and many theoreticians now maintain that social and personal context, as well as writer's intent, are important elements in textual analysis and interpretation. Although the creative process cannot be reconstructed, that is no reason to reject the writer's testimony altogether. Irony, humor, parody, social satire, and other means and modes can be understood only in terms of the writer's intent, and not simply by "the intent of the text." Nonetheless, there are limits to the writer's self-consciousness, and naturally to our knowledge of it, and the dispute over intent continues in full force.³⁷

The literary riddle has hardly entered this debate. It could, however, be seen as a model—albeit a modest one—which confirms the importance of the author/writer's intentionality for interpretation, at least in the early stage of uncovering the subject of the riddle. In this stage (on subsequent ones, after the solution, see below, "Genre Metamorphoses") the writer's intent is also revealed in his challenge to the riddlees—that is, by his very use of the text as a riddle and by the existence of the subject as a single solution supported and defined through a system of hints. In terms of the riddling situation, the writer's intent (he himself reveals the subject at the end of the contest, or in a written explanation) serves as the exclusive, binding criterion for determining the riddlee's success; in a public contest, it also determines the winners and the distribution of prizes.

In riddling, the author's intent is embodied in the appropriateness of the text—that is, in the balance between encoding and revealing that leads to a single solution. Often, especially in the case of emblem riddles, the author himself attaches a detailed commentary to his riddle and tries to prove that the framework of hints is indeed appropriate to the subject he chose, and to that subject alone. Intention is more obvious in the riddle than in other genres: the meaning and solution are unique; the riddle, unlike other genres, requires its readers to announce the solution and explicate it, while they must accept the author's absolute authority in deciding whether they have succeeded or failed in the game.

Yes, the reader can fail. In competitions involving emblem riddles, contestants sometimes arrived at wrong answers; these can be traced because they were submitted in writing.³⁸ All of them were partial, dealing only with certain items in the text and disregarding others that did not fit the proposed solution. A partial solution is inevitably mistaken, especially in long and labyrinthine riddles; in the wealth of hints directed to a particular subject, some can always be found which, when taken out of context, seem to point to a different subject. An appropriate interpretation encompasses the greatest possible number of details and connects them to

the single subject. To solve an emblem riddle it was not enough simply to announce the solution in a word; all the major clues had to be explicated as well. This requirement stemmed, of course, from the tremendous complexity of such riddles, but it was also engendered by a holistic conception of interpretation: just as the author presented an appropriate system of clues, so the riddlee must present an appropriate system of interpretation, which must serve as its own proof.

There may seem to be one obvious exception to this rule of exclusive solution: some literary riddles appear to be open to two solutions and strongly suggest a witty double meaning. The description deceives the reader into thinking the hidden solution is daringly erotic; when he ventures such a solution, or even shows he is thinking of it, for example by blushing, the author feigns honesty and reveals that the riddle is entirely innocent—to the riddlee's embarrassment and the amusement of the audience. This aspect, found in folk riddles as well, was transferred to "high" literary riddles: in Italian, for example, they are abundant in Giovanfrancesco Straparola's book *Le Piacevoli Notti* (1550) and in Hebrew in a riddle by Immanuel Ha-Romi (ca. 1270–1330), which implies an adulterous woman, but actually describes the philosophical concept of primordial matter.³⁹ Another riddle by Efraim Luzzatto (Lucerne 1727–1792) apparently portrays a bride and groom in audacious images, while actually referring to a magnet.⁴⁰ The device sometimes works in the opposite direction as well. A. Jolles mentions riddles based on neutral description, with one innocent solution meant for "ladies" and another, more colorful, for "gentlemen;" this (and other examples) he cites as the basis for the "common view" that every riddle has several solutions.⁴¹ This is a mistake. In the former example, the erotic description is deceptive, and the real answer is truly innocent and simple. In the second example as well, there are not two parallel solutions of equal value; the true answer is the erotic, colorful one meant for "gentlemen," while the "ladies" are given a mistaken and partial solution, which may correspond with standards of politeness but not with the riddle in its authentic form. (And it is hard to believe that those ladies settled for the naïve solution without understanding the real point, even in Jolles's time, in the late 1920s.) In all these cases, double meaning is on the plane of deception, and not on the level of true and necessary explanation.

The Riddle's Inherent Paradox

One may think the interpreter, after solving the riddle, has no more use for it; as far as he is concerned, it has done its duty. The moment the riddle is completed, it disappears as a riddle—at least for that riddlee, in that place. This paradox was favored by poets of the Renaissance and the Baroque and became a popular motif in riddles whose subject was the riddle as a literary genre. Typical formulations, in translation, might read: "My veiled face is my face itself; unveiled, it is annulled;" or, "I am hidden and concealed, yet if you discover me, I will disappear before your eyes forever." In this spirit, Galileo Galilei (the great scientist was also a poet) composed a sonnet-riddle on the riddle in honor of Antonio Malatesti, an Italian riddler-poet of his time;⁴² the motif is also echoed in Hebrew riddles about riddles or secrets penned by Moshe Zacuto, Shlomo de Oliveyra and Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto.

Yet, while a riddle that has been solved ceases to be a riddle for the solver, it does continue to exist for him as another kind of poem. In fact, many riddles, especially those founded on paradoxical metaphors, become impressive poems when solved for the very reason that their metaphorical texture is now revealed and can be appreciated in its own right, and no longer as a system of encoding and deception. This also explains why writers considered the literary riddle a poetic genre subject to the laws of “higher” poetics and composed such riddles according to the rules of prosody and rhetoric followed in other types of poetry.

What dies, cast upon the earth, is buried naked among men,
Yet lives again from in its grave, bears children, all emerging clad?⁴³

As we have seen, the solution to this riddle by Yehuda Halevi is a seed (grain of wheat): the seed revives, sprouts, even bears many like itself and only afterward is buried, or sown. Moreover, it is buried naked, unlike human burial practice, yet its offspring are born clothed (in chaff, within the new sheaf). This double paradox, well suited to a metaphorical riddle (and indeed popular in riddles about seeds in many languages) is much more than an encoding device; when revealed, it becomes a central and meaningful simile and thus appears in a variety of literary contexts, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Dov Sadan indicates the link between this simile and the idea of resurrection of the dead, an association stemming from the Bible, rabbinic literature, and the New Testament, which has also developed in modern and contemporary literature.⁴⁴ He also refers to the riddle by Yehuda Halevi, which was clearly meant not only to entertain but also to stimulate serious contemplation: in the *Kuzari* (4.23) Halevi compares the nation’s existence in exile to the disintegration of the seed in the ground, which is also the secret of its growth. Thus, to solve the riddle is the first step; a better, or at least a different reward awaits the interpreter after the riddle is solved, when the double paradox ceases to be an encoding device and reveals itself as a profound metaphor. But that is the second stage, after the game is over.

In word riddles based mainly on combinations and calculations of letters and on metalinguistic games, there is not usually much room left in the solution for additional meanings. Riddles about proper names serve mainly as a challenging amusement, and they are exhausted in their solutions like a filled-in crossword puzzle. But some verbal riddles may continue to act on the reader even after they have been solved. Indeed, this sort of word riddle may illuminate the inherent capacity of language to veil and unveil—though only after the game is concluded, of course.

Finding the single correct solution produces a very narrow opening, through which the interpreter must pass in order to reach additional meanings.

Genre Metamorphoses: To the Riddle and Back

The fact that a solved riddle becomes an overt poem brings us to a more general phenomenon: the metamorphoses of genres, both toward and away from the riddle. Just as a riddle can turn into a descriptive epigram, so an epigram can be made into a riddle

if the two basic conditions are met: the intent to pose a challenge in the riddling situation, and the formal structuring of the text along the lines we have set out.

Because the epigram and other genres such as drinking songs and songs of self-praise are often based on elements characteristic of riddles (such as apparent contradictions), they can become actual riddles with only minor changes. Here, usage depends on the author's intent, and that intent determines identity. Yet even original intent does not prevent transfer to another use or genre. When we speak of genre transformations, we obviously abandon the original intent and add another dimension—the intent of a later adapter, and the new function then given the text: from epigram to riddle, or vice versa. Everything we have said about the author holds true, then, for the adapter as well: a text is a riddle as long as it is used as a riddle, whether according to the author's intent (in the first stage) or according to the adapter's (at a later stage), assuming, of course, the ability of the text to play that role—that is, assuming it has riddle-like qualities. The adapter can imbue it with those qualities, for example, by taking the keyword of an overt epigram which points to the subject, and making it the hidden solution-word.⁴⁵ In many cases the adapter actually needed to make no internal textual change at all; he could simply detach the text from a wider, overt one (such as a story) and present the fragment as a self-sufficient riddle. He could even take a whole text, as it was, and subordinate it to a new purpose.

Generic transformations such as these between metaphorical riddles and descriptive epigrams are common among other genres as well. A riddle becomes a proverb, parable, philosophic poem, or some other kind of overt form if its function as a challenge in the riddling situation is taken away; a proverb, parable, philosophic poem, or any transparent poem becomes a riddle if it can serve in the riddling situation—that is, if it undergoes a process of enigmatization, not the encoding normal in the composition of a riddle, but a special encoding of a given text, and its transfer to the domain of riddles.

In terms of genre, the adapter's status is the same as that of the riddle's original author even in its generic signaling. For riddles not formulated as questions, as we have seen, the author makes it clear to the addressees that they are being challenged with a riddle through its use in society (context) as well as its broader textual context (co-text), for example, by presenting the poem as a riddle within the events of a narrative, including it in a collection of riddles, putting the solution elsewhere, or in an appropriate title. If the author can do all this, the adapter can do so even more easily, for his major role is in changing the genre. If he turns an overt poem into a riddle by enigmatization, he may have to remove the solution word (although this is not the case in every text); if the adapter turns a riddle into an overt poem she may include the solution word in the body of the text or at its head.

In genre transformations from the riddle or to it, the subject of the text and its meaning can be affected in two ways: a close transformation, in which the subject and meaning of the words do not change, but are rather uncovered (from riddle to overt genre) or encoded (from overt genre to riddle); and a distant transformation, in which the subject and meaning of the words are transfigured and the major change is semantic.

CLOSE TRANSFORMATION

Examples: riddle / epigram; riddle / satirical monologue; boasting poem / riddle; proverb / riddle; riddle / poem

The transformation of riddle to epigram is close because it entails only uncovering or encoding the same subject and the meaning of the same tropes without changing them. Apparent oppositions, such as “mute, yet speaks clearly;” “crippled, yet overtakes even horsemen;” “buried, yet buries even heroes,” and so on, are about the pen, and describe it in the same way whether in a riddle or an epigram. The difference between the two is not in meaning but in genre, function (whether or not it provides a challenge), and general appearance (enigmas demand deciphering or a surprising description of an overt subject). Let us consider some examples of close transformations in other genres.

RIDDLE/POEM

A close transformation that occurred near the time of original composition can be found in a sonnet by Samuel Archevolti (Cesena 1530–Padua 1611), poet and rabbi from Padua and author of the treatise on poetics *Arugat Habosem*. This sonnet, which begins “Why is my back loaded with fine flour,”⁴⁶ appears in some manuscripts as an overt poem, headed with the title “The Ass’s Complaint.” It has been published and even recorded in our own day in the same form. The ass bemoans his labor while alive and his suffering even after death, when his hide is made into drum-heads. And yet this appearance as an overt, satirical poem of complaint is actually late; the sonnet was originally presented as a riddle, and the listeners themselves were required to discover who the speaker was. The proof is in another manuscript, an anthology of poems, aphorisms, and letters by Archevolti. In the section titled “Jocular words for children’s entertainment at Purim,” the sonnet appears with the phrase: “I have posed a riddle for pupils, may God protect and preserve them.”⁴⁷ The solution “ass” was thus added as a title only in later manuscripts that turned the poem into an overt monologue poem. The transformation is close: the subject is unchanged, only revealed; yet the effect (enigmatic statements versus overt humor), function, and genre are, of course, different at every stage.

Already in the classical period of Hebrew poetry in Spain, such genre transformations were made consciously and deliberately. The most explicit example—both the earliest and the richest—appears in Samuel Hanagid’s book *Ben Mishlei*. In this volume of philosophical poems, Hanagid devoted a section (the sixth in the arrangement of the collection) to special philosophical poems: in almost every one of them there is one section that was originally a riddle and another that describes, in miniature, the original riddling situation and its conclusion—that is, how the riddle was posed to Hanagid and how he solved it. Question, description, and response are woven together in the poem:

Here, for you, are wondrous riddles; when wise men asked me, I solved them.

They said: Who causes much woe yet is beloved?

It is the Lord! I answered them.⁴⁸

The solution word was usually also part of the rhyme scheme, as if the poet had succeeded both in solving the riddle and in thereby completing the poem:

They said to me: Are there companions adhering to each other like plaits of onions,
Flying without wings, running without legs? I answered them: the heavens.⁴⁹

Moreover, in many cases poets introduced a series of riddles and their solutions within a single poem:

And he said to me: Is there life in death, without a heart?

I answered: foolishness.

And he continued: Is there death in life, with the body intact?

I answered: poverty.

And he said: What are loved when black, yet hated when white or yellow, liquid yet slake
no thirst: olives in the press, oozing drops of oil.

What thread is sewn with blackened heads unpierced; crushed, yet its children crush the heads
of men.

I answered: a bunch of grapes.⁵⁰

Some of the riddles were apparently traditional and may really have been posed to Samuel Hanagid; yet the specific poetic formula in Hebrew that appears in *Ben Mishlei* is Hanagid's own invention. He, then, both composed the riddles and adapted them to these philosophical poems. This is a definitive and conscious transformation: if anyone wanted to use this material as true riddles, they would have to delete the solution word and the descriptions of the riddling situation—that is, return to the point of departure. In fact, that is just what Even-Shoshan and Beck did in their book *Ahuda na*, including some of Hanagid's poems from that chapter of *Ben Mishlei*, with the necessary changes. For example:

He said: 'Is there a creature born without breath or soul, emerging from the womb without
a heart, that sits some days, covered and warm, and gives birth to living beings?'

I answered him: 'an egg.'⁵¹

Now becomes:

Is there a creature born without breath or soul, emerging from the womb without a heart?
And sits some days, covered and warm, and gives birth to dead of soul?⁵²

The riddle that had become a philosophical poem was turned back into a riddle, at the expense of meter and rhyme and, of course, by deleting the words describing the riddling situation and the solution ("And he said . . . and I answered him; an egg"). Such editing, even if not acceptable to everyone, is certainly effective as far as genre transformation is concerned.

DISTANT TRANSFORMATION

Examples: riddle / proverb / saying / enigmatic "motto"

In transformations of more distant genres to and from the riddle, a change takes place in the subject itself and its literal meaning. Some words discard a simple meaning for a metaphorical or metonymic one; others return to their simple meaning, thereby altering the entire utterance.

The phrase "out of the strong came forth sweetness" serves as a proverb in Hebrew, a general statement commonly applied to situations whose beginning is

difficult or threatening but which end happily. But the phrase was originally part of Samson's riddle ("Out of the eater came forth food and out of the strong came forth sweetness"; Jud. 14:14). In the biblical context it referred to the carcass of a lion and the honey of the bees who had made their hive in it; if we consider other interpretations, this riddle also spoke of love or weddings. In any case, the sentence was not originally meant to generalize about obvious things, but, on the contrary, to conceal its specific, indeed unique, subject known to Samson alone. The verbal composition of the phrase "out of the strong came forth sweetness" could serve either as a riddle or as a proverb, but the meaning would be different in each case; in both instances, this meaning would become apparent through the role assigned to the phrase in the social and verbal context. This is also true with Hillel's words to the skull floating on the water: "Because you drowned someone they drowned you; and those who drowned you will also drown" (Avot, 2,6). Yet, for some reason, this remained a potential proverb rather than an actual one. There are also more recent instances of such distant transformations. The Aramaic proverb, "Stripped to nakedness but wearing shoes" (Sotah 8b) is based on a *fortiori* reasoning (if naked, he should be barefoot as well; if not, the sentence is a contradiction) and is used in that sense in the Talmudic discussion; but it has also been understood as a graphic riddle describing a candle stuck in a candlestick. The original intent, function, and even the meaning of the words have changed completely.⁵³

FALSE TRANSFORMATIONS

Although transformations to and from the riddle do often occur, they are naturally not a primary phenomenon. Most riddles and most overt texts undergo no genre transformation and continue to be preserved in their original form. Nonetheless, this subject (like many others in the field of riddles) has evoked a variety of strange and extreme views, naïvely expressed with no awareness of the theoretical problem. Such statements have generated confusion between "the riddle of existence" and the riddle as a literary genre, or between that genre and other genres characterized by enigmatic formulation, as well as sublime disregard of the rules governing the proper riddle: the challenge of the riddling situation, the balance between obscurity and lucidity, appropriateness of clues and other conditions defining the riddle. Some scholars have considered a given text to be a riddle only because it was couched as a question, was rich in metaphors, or spoke of astonishing or mysterious things, even though its subject was explicit. A telling example, I believe, is the assumption that many verses in the book of Proverbs are transformed riddles or solutions to riddles which have not been preserved. Consider, for instance, the verses "There are three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not: the way of the vulture in the air; the way of a snake upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a young woman." (Prov. 30:18–19). Some see these verses as "a proverb in response to a riddle asked among various peoples: 'What moves yet leaves no tracks?' The answer to the riddle is provided here with a few examples."⁵⁴ But if we are speaking of the proper riddle, the biblical text as it is presented hardly supports such a view, for the riddle's solution cannot be given "in a few examples" but only in one specific answer; even if we assume that some folk

riddles have two solutions, each of them must relate to highly specific hints. Yet the question, "What moves, yet leaves no tracks" provides no hints at all, and endless answers are possible; some of them even appear in the Bible itself—wind, shadow, smoke, human life—quite apart from the vulture's flight, snake, ship, and man. Other scholars have held that these verses contained not a continuous answer to an absent riddle, but a riddle along with its solution—that is: "There are three things which are too wonderful for me, four which I know not" is the riddle, while the continuation, "vulture, etc." is the solution. But this cannot be true, either, for the very same reason: the first verse does not provide a challenge (such as: "Tell me, what four things do I know not") because it contains no hint of a solution; however wise a man may be, there will be more than four things he does not know. Three and four here are, in fact, a rhetorical expression meant to arouse the listener's attention to the direct continuation of the gnomic saying,⁵⁵ without any genre transformation.

A number of hyperbolic assumptions about riddle transformations were voiced not long ago by Georg Nador in his book discussing what he held to be riddles in the Talmud and in midrashim.⁵⁶ He distinguished what he called "direct riddles" (*direkte Rätsel*), formulated as questions, from "indirect riddles" (*indirekte Rätsel*), but the examples in both categories are implausible. Among the "direct" riddles he presents a series of questions posed by ben Zoma: "Who is wise? He who learns from every man, as it is written, 'From all my teachers I have gained understanding'. . . . Who is strong? He who subdues his evil inclinations, as it is written, 'He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he that rules his spirit than one who captures a city;' Who is rich?" etc. (Avot 4.1). Nador sees these as riddles posed by ben Zoma in the house of study; when the students were unable to answer correctly, he revealed the correct "solution," in all its paradoxicality. But if these were truly challenging questions, they could have been met with other correct solutions. "Who is strong?" does indeed lead to "He who subdues his evil inclination," reinforced by the supporting verse; yet in the world of the rabbis, with their preference for spiritual strength rather than physical force, one could equally have answered "He who sanctifies the Name of God" or "He who sacrifices himself for the sake of Torah." In fact, no answer is demanded of the listener, because the questions "Who is strong, wise, rich?" are simply rhetorical, drawing the listener's attention to the direct continuation of the moral teaching; they really imply declarative sentences: "This is a strong man—he who subdues his evil inclination." The formulation of the question is not meant to mislead.⁵⁷ The statement, in the same text, by Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, "One whose fear of sin preceeds his wisdom—his wisdom will endure," could be reformulated: "Whose wisdom endures? One whose wisdom is preceded by fear of sin," without creating a riddle.

Nador similarly translates the *mishnah*: "Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short and the task is great, the workers are lazy, the reward great, and the master is pressing" (Avot 2.15) to read *ein Rätsel von Rabbi Tarphon: Der Tag ist kurz* (A riddle from Rabbi Tarfon: The day is short. [p. 67]) The author has correctly explained the proverb "When wine goes in, the secrets come out" by the famous *gematria* (both "wine" and "secret", יין and סוד = 70); but in his translation, it is as if the text read: "Rule of the game: whatever goes in must come out. Wine goes in. What must come out? The secret" (p. 127). This adaptation, of course, changes everything.

There are numerous other examples. All these assumptions about transformations which Nador has presented as facts arise from a conception prevalent among his predecessors. He has developed it, even proclaiming it in the introduction of his book (p. 10); in his view, riddles are everywhere: like Molière's observation that not everyone knows he speaks prose, so, Nador claims, not everyone knows he is solving riddles. Perhaps he is joking, but he is certainly mistaken in his understanding of the riddle. What distinguishes it from other genres if everything is either a riddle or a transformed riddle? This confusion is particularly severe in light of all we have discussed above. It is the true transformation from genre to genre, which in fact teaches us something about the boundaries of the riddle proper and its uniqueness.

Notes

A shorter Hebrew version of this essay is included in pages 44–61 in D. Pagis, *Al Sod Hatum* [A secret sealed], Jerusalem, 1986. The editors wish to thank Ada Pagis for making the manuscript available to us and Matti Huss for his invaluable help in preparing this essay for publication.

1. Long versified riddles were composed in Hebrew as early as the Middle Ages in Spain (by Yehuda HaLevi and Avraham Ibn Ezra among others), and later in Italy beginning in the twelfth century (by Yerahmiel Bar Shlomo) and continuing nearly until the period in question, the early seventeenth century (Yosef Concio). Yet in each of these cases the form was uniformly prosodic, without sections of distinct rhyme patterns, and naturally without *tsura* (emblematic pictures) or *lo'ez*.

2. Petsch 1899: 13–44; Taylor 1951: 1; Dundes and Georges 1963: 113; Scott 1965: 19.

3. Such has been the case since biblical times (the prize for solving Samson's riddle: thirty sheets and thirty changes of garments), Jud. 14: 12–13; for riddles of ancient Greece, see Ohlert 1886; Kelson 1919. Accounts of contests and prizes for winners solving Hebrew riddles from after the biblical period involve *hidot-ha-tsura-ve-halo'ez* almost exclusively. [See Pagis 1986: 91–92, 99–100—Eds.]

4. See Dundes and Georges 1963.

5. Rosen-Moked 1981: 174–176.

6. Ha-Levi 1894–1930: 209, no. 43.

7. Ibid., 201, no. 21.

8. Ibid., 195, no. 4.

9. Rosen-Moked 1981: 177.

10. Ha-Levi 1896–1910: 204, no. 27.

11. De Filippis 1948: 78.

12. Cervantes 1968.

13. Roth 1950: 211.

14. Pagis 1986: 248.

15. *Habet u-re'e* [we have been unable to locate the source—Eds.]

16. Valvason 1662.

17. *Qinna Shemor*. Bernstein 1932: 51–52.

18. An example of such a bilingual hint is found in a Spanish riddle of 1684 composed by Miguel [Daniel Levi] de Barrios about the *Reshit*; because the text is in Spanish, the direction is, of course, reversed: the word *Rosa* ['rose'], when pronounced, alludes to the Hebrew word *Rosha* ['her head'], which must, in turn, be translated to the Spanish *principio*, the riddle's solution. This translation is forced, but in the riddle is substantiated by a number of verses containing words derived from the root *r'sh*, as we learn from the commentary penned by the author himself. Additional details in Pagis 1986: 84, no. 32.

19. Ibid., 255.
20. Ibid., 230–234.
21. Rosen-Moked 1981.
22. See Sibilet's definition, *l'obscurité tant lucide*, from 1556 (quoted by P. A. Grattet-Duplessis) in Le Gai 1850: 10.
23. *Ve-iveret yefat ayin*. Habermann 1960: 208–210.
24. *U-mahu*, Bialik and Ravnitzky V 1927: addenda I, 35, no. 63 III; *U-ma iver*. Ha-Levi 1894–1930: 196, no. 8; *U-mi-hashuq*. Ibid., 201, no. 19; *Mahu ha-davar*. Modena 1595: no. 41; *Ha-teda guf hasar yad* [Moshe Deri]. Davidson II 1924–1933: 168, no. 1205.
25. *Emor li*. Ha-Levi 1896–1910: 201, no. 20.
26. *Ahuda lakhem*. Kahana 1892: 90, no. 68; *Ahud le-vanim*. Ibid., 87, no. 67; *Ahud hida*. Davidson I 1924–1933: 115, no. 431.
27. Zerah Shimshon Pincherle. Pagis 1986: 250.
28. *Lakhem re'ai* [Yitshaq Luzzato]. Pagis 1986: 254.
29. Rosen-Moked 1981: 169.
30. *Re'e sharvit qetsar goma*. Ha-Levi 1896–1910: 197, no. 12.
31. *Teva dinot quba*. Ha-Levi 1896–1910: 191, no. 30a; *Kli mekhil*. Ibid., 195, no. 5; *Ahot shemesh*. Ibn Ezra 1935: 99, no. 98.
32. *Hen ki kemet* [Immanuel Hai Ricchi]. Pagis 1986: 252; *Sovev kehafakhpakh* [Immanuel Hai Ricchi]. Ibid., 256; *Of af bli kanaf*. Ibid., 19.
33. *Lavush yatziati*. Modena 1595: no. 30; *Yedidi ma tevaqsheni*. Rosin 1885–1894: 207, no. 108; *Ze shmi im tidreshenu*. [we have been unable to locate the source—Eds.]; *Ani yahid, ani rabim* [Avraham Yedidya Basile]. Pagis 1986: 249; *Ani sovel, ani zolel* [Anon.]; Ibid., 249.
34. Grimm's 1972: 264–268, no. 55. On neck riddles, see the essay by Richard Baumann in this volume; Abrahams 1980: 2, 183–186 analyzes neck riddles in the context of plot as well. John D. Dorst sought a thematic and structural connection between neck riddles and the stories framing them (Dorst 1978: 111–115).
35. Luzzato 1950: 144. In his opinion, Samson's riddle is appropriate in that it applies to any lion, as strength is intrinsic to it, and true of all honey, as sweetness is intrinsic to it. This explanation fits only the Philistines' formulation of the answer: "What is stronger than a lion? and what is sweeter than honey?" (Jud. 14:18) and not the words of the riddle. Opinions expressed by others in the course of commentary on the story have been surveyed by Zakovitch 1982: 106–108, notes. The MaLBIM (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Mikhel 1809–1879) held that although the riddle seems impossible to guess, when Samson told the Philistines they must "find out" the solution (vs. 14:12), he hinted they should look in the town and surrounding area until they found the lion's carcass (thus he claims there is an appropriate hint; RaMHaL claimed there was an appropriate subject). Zakovitch gives examples of the neck-riddle in folklore and introduces the views of biblical scholars (Gunkel, Grossman and others) who endeavored to present Samson's riddle as an appropriate, general riddle. Dov Noy interpreted it as a wedding riddle, Noy 1963: 66–67.
36. An example of a Hebrew riddle from the Spanish period: "What tree is it whose branches are in the earth, its roots the Lord created in the heavens / Who bears pleasant fruit in its season, though be it uprooted at any moment?" For this riddle, attributed to Ibn Gabirol (Davidson II 1924–1933: 195, no. 352), although it is not his and is not included in later editions of his poetry, four solutions have been proposed: Bialik and Ravnitzsky, in their edition of Ibn Gabirol's poems (Bialik and Ravnitzky 1927 I: 167, no. 99; II: 129; V: 35, no. 63 and corresponding note on page 41, on the basis of their predecessors) suggested "the sun", after an epigram by Alharizi ("Behold the sun, who spreads his wings over the earth, illuminating its darkness / Like a leafy tree grown in heaven, whose branches reach down to the earth;" Alharizi 1952: 273). A manuscript mentioned by A. A. Harkavi suggested: "wisdom."

Hayyim Brody suggested: "the wise man." Ya'akov Cohen guessed: "man." (See Cohen 1931: 179–180). But the correct answer is, in fact, "the sun." An example of a word riddle for which two solutions were conjectured: *Lerosh hashem asirit*. Ha-Levi 1896–1910: 195, no. 6. See Brody's commentary there, but the correct answer is the one in the text.

37. Publications for and against are numerous, and the contentions they present are too entangled to be unraveled here. Instead, I would like to cite the summary proposed by Brinker 1980: 137–154, who analyzes the extreme positions in the controversy: the claim that texts can always have a definite meaning "in and of themselves," and the claim that texts can never have a defined meaning without assuming something about the intent of the speaker. Against both of these views, Brinker maintains: "The writer's intent, an impetus of great importance and power in a certain (and legitimate) way of reading, imposes no real constraint on the freedom to interpret representational values or the truths contained in a fictional work" (ibid., 145). For our interests, we remark the historical fact that the poetics of the literary riddle (conscious of the genre's nature) always held that the writer's intent is the determining fact in the riddle's interpretation. Intent was focused in the formal, hidden object, which was completely encapsulated in the solution-word. This attitude found expression in the manner the riddle was composed, in the riddling situation, and it was relevant as long as the text remained a riddle. As soon as the answer was discovered, the riddle became an overt poem, open to additional, not alternative, interpretations.

38. Pagis 1986: 63–64.

39. Yarden 1957: 305.

40. Fichman 1942: 68.

41. Jolles 1930: 142.

42. Malatesti 1865, quoted in Taylor 1948: 6; De Filippis 1948.

43. Ha-Levi 1894–1930: 200, no. 17.

44. Sadan 1964: 54.

45. Ohlert 1886: 108; Kelson 1919: 766.

46. *Lama alei shikhmi*. Bernstein 1939: 35, no. 66.

47. Kaufmann Ms 456: 42, no. 41.

48. Shmuel Ha-Nagid 1982: 175, no. 453.

49. Ibid., no. 455.

50. Ibid., no. 460.

51. Ibid., 185, no. 476.

52. Even-Shoshan and Beck 1944: 41.

53. Hasan-Rokem 1974: 936–940.

54. Friedreich 1860; Wünsche 1883; Kelson 1919; Rossi 1971; Bryant 1983: 30–31, 106 [also Thompson 1974: 132—Eds.]

55. Tur-Sinai 1958: 108.

56. Nador 1967.

57. Compare Hasan-Rokem 1982: 19: "Proverbs are affirmatives even when formulated as a question, an order, a request, etc." The same, in reverse, applies to riddles as well. Every proper riddle must be a challenging question, even if it is formulated as a statement (description, etc.). See above on the transformation of proverbs to riddles and vice versa; see also Dundes 1964.

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6

“Spinning Threads of Sand”: Riddles as Images of Loss in the Midrash on Lamentations

GALIT HASAN-ROKEM

Loss and destruction are central themes in the Hebrew and Aramaic literature of Late Antiquity. The lives of individuals often become stories told about the cosmic destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, much as the story of the loss of the temple cannot be told but via the suffering of individuals. It may be considered a special stroke of genius, however, that these grim themes have been integrated in the literature of the rabbis into a playfully intricate design—the Midrash. Exegetically motivated, this textual practice weaves threads of mystical meditation, philosophical speculation, and most of all legendary, mythical, and fantastic narratives around the base text, the Hebrew biblical canon.

Of all the midrashic texts, the fifth- or sixth-century Palestinian *Eikha Rabba*, the Midrash on the book of Lamentations, has necessarily the most direct association with themes of destruction and loss.¹ At the center of this text of pain there is a delightful chain of eleven riddle tales.² Only readers who overlook the centrality of playfulness in midrashic practice would find their presence there out of place. The following reading is guided by the insight that play and humor may be the most powerful modes of spiritual survival in moments of utter stress.³ The riddle tales are therefore by no means “comic relief” provided to sweeten the bitterness of most parts of the text, tales of martyrdom and their like, by a total deviation from the main subject of the book. They deal in their own way, playfully, with the very essence of *Eikha Rabba*, with the question “Why?” (*Eikha?*). Moreover, by extrapolating from the consonantal identity of the two words in Hebrew, the question “Why?” is transformed to the question “*Ayeka?*” (Where are you?), echoing God’s hide-and-seek with Adam among the trees of Eden.

The eleven riddle tales are introduced in the context of the second half of the first verse of Lamentations, chapter 1: “great among the nations.” This additional praise of Jerusalem as remembered after its destruction is explained by the rabbis not simply as an instance of parallelism, one of the main devices of biblical poetry,

but as carrying the surplus meaning “great in knowledge.” This interpretation frames the tales in the context of the intellectual competition between Jerusalem and the standard ideal of knowledge in Mediterranean Antiquity as well as Late Antiquity, the city of Athens.⁴ It is therefore Athenians and Jerusalemites who confront each other in the tales:

(1) There was a man from Jerusalem who went to Athens to stay with a friend for several days. His time came [to die] and he entrusted his belongings to the man he was staying with. He told him: Should my son come to you and desire these belongings, don’t give them to him unless he does three wise acts [things]. They [the Athenians] had [an agreement] that none of them would point the way to another person’s house for lodging. The son heard [of his father’s death] and went there, knowing the name of the man. He came and sat at the city gate and saw a man carrying a load of wood, and said, “Are you selling that wood?” He said: “Yes.” He said: “Take payment and go unload it [at so-and-so’s house].” He went with him until they arrived at the man’s house. He began calling: “I’m unloading it.” [The master of the house] said, “Who asked you to do so?” He said: “Come out and take the wood.” He said to him: “Who told you to give them to me?” He said: “It is not yours; it belongs to the one sitting behind it.” He came out and asked who he was. He said: “Who are you?” He said to him: “I am the son of the man from Jerusalem who died at your house.” He took him in and prepared him a meal. The man had a wife, two sons, and two daughters. They sat down to eat and they brought him five young birds. He said to him: “Take them and serve.” He said to him: “It is not my [role] since I am a guest. He said to him: “Do me the pleasure.” He took one bird and set it before the master of the house and his wife, took another and set it before the two sons, took another and set it before the two daughters, and took two for himself. He said to him: “How have you served?” He said to him: “I said to you, did I not, that I am a guest and that it is not my [role], but I have served well in any case—you and your wife and the bird make three heads, your two sons and a bird make three heads, your two daughters and a bird make three heads, and I and two birds make three heads. In the evening he made a meal for him and brought him one bird. He said to him: “Take it and serve.” He said to him: “It is not my [role], since I am a guest.” He said to him: “Do me the pleasure.” He took the head and set it before the master of the house, took the stomach and set it before his wife, took the legs and set them before the two sons, took the wings and set them before the two daughters, and took the body and all the rest for himself. He said to him: “How have you served?” He said to him: “I told you, did I not, that it is not my [role], but I have served well in any case. I gave you the head because you are the head of the house, and the stomach and entrails to your wife because from there her children emerged, I gave the two legs to your two sons who are the two pillars of your house, I gave the two wings to your two daughters who will take their marriage contracts and leave, and I took the body [shaped like a boat] and the rest for myself, since I will be leaving on a boat. He said to him: “Go ahead and give me my father’s belongings and I will go my way.” He went ahead and gave him his things and he went away.

(2) Four men of Jerusalem went to Athens and lodged with a certain man. In the evening he prepared a meal for them. While they were eating and drinking he made them four beds, one of them damaged. After they had eaten and drunk, he said: “I have heard that the men of Jerusalem are extremely wise; I will go in and lie there among them to find out what they say.” The one who was lying on the damaged bed got up, and said: “You may think that I am lying on a bed, but I am actually lying on the ground.” The second one got up and said: “Is that any wonder? The meat he gave us tasted like dog meat.” The third got up and said: “Is that any wonder? The wine we drank had the taste of the grave.” The fourth got up and said: “Is that

any wonder? The man himself, the proprietor, is not the son of his father." At this the proprietor said: "One is telling the truth and three are lying." He rose in the morning and went to the butcher and said to him: "Take payment and give me the same meat as last night." He said to him: "I have none." He said to him: "Was there anything special about it?" He said to him: "I had a kid whose mother died and I had a nursing bitch and the kid nursed from her, and when you came in the evening and pressed me, I had no meat to give you and I slaughtered the kid and gave you the meat." At that point he said: "Two are telling the truth and two are lying." He went to the wine merchant and said to him: "Take payment and give me the same wine as last night." He said to him: "I have none." He said to him: "Was there anything special about it?" He said to him: "I have a vine that grows on the grave of our father, and you pressed me and I had no wine to give you, so I gave you of that wine. At that point he said: "Three are telling the truth and one is lying." He [the proprietor] said: "This man [the proprietor himself] must go and check with his mother. He went to his mother and said to her: "Whose son am I?" She said to him: "Your father's." He said to her: "Tell me the truth, whose son am I, or I will kill you now." She said to him: "Your father could not have a child, did I not do well when I prostituted myself and brought you this property instead of letting it go to others?" At that point he said: "Will the men of Jerusalem come to us and make us all bastards?" They [he and his mother, or he and the other men of the city] agreed that they would not take in people from Jerusalem.

(3) Then, some time later, a man of Jerusalem went to Athens and no one wanted to give him lodging. He went to an inn and after he had eaten and drunk he asked to sleep there. The innkeeper said to him: "We have already agreed among us that no one from Jerusalem will sleep here, until he jumps three times. He said to him: "I don't know how you jump here, so jump first and I will do after you." He [the inn keeper] jumped the first time and reached the middle of the inn, jumped a second time and reached the inn's gate, and jumped a third time and was outside the gate. The man of Jerusalem went and shut the gate before him. He said to him: "What are you doing?" He said to him: "I am doing to you what you wanted to do to me."

(4) A man from Athens went to Jerusalem and went into a school and met children there. Their teacher was not there. He questioned them and they answered. They said to him: "We are laboring for nothing; let us agree between us that whenever one is asked and does not answer he will have to give up his garments." They agreed. They said to him: "Ask us first, since you are an old man." He said to them: "You ask first because you live here." They said to him: "What is it, nine go out and eight are whole, and 24 serve, and two pour, and one drinks." He could not answer so they took his garments. He went to Rabban Yohanan Ben-Zakkai and said to him: "Is this how you behave in your place, taking the clothes from a guest?" He said to him: "Who took your clothes?" He said to him: "The children in the school." He said to him: "Did they ask you a question that you could not answer?" He told him the story. He said to him: "Go tell them that the nine covered are the nine months of pregnancy, the eight sitting are the eight days before circumcision, the 24 serving are the 24 months that a woman nurses, the two pourers are the two breasts, and the one drinking is the baby." He went and answered them and they gave him his garments, and they called to him: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle." (Judges 14:18)

(5) An Athenian went to Jerusalem and met a boy. He gave him money and said to him: "Go buy me cheese and eggs." When he came, he [the Athenian] said to him: "Tell me, whose eggs are these, a white hen's or a black hen's?" The boy said to him: "Tell me, whose cheese is this, of white goats or black goats?"

(6) An Athenian came to Jerusalem and met a boy. He gave him money and said to him: "Go buy me figs." He went and bought. He said to him: "Good for you." He said to him: "[Did I do this] nothing?" He said to him: "What do you want?" He said to him: "You gave your money and I gave my legs." He said to him: "Take them [the fruits] and divide them [between us]." One was rotten and he put it before himself, and the good one before the guest. He said to him: "Good for you." He [the Athenian] said: "They say rightly that the men of Jerusalem are very wise, because he [you] knew that the money was his [mine], he [you] chose the good one and put it before him [me]." When he went he [the boy] said to him [the Athenian]: "By your life, let us cast lots. If you win, you will take what is before me."

(7) An Athenian went to Jerusalem and met a boy. He said: "Take this money and bring me enough food that I can eat and be satiated and have some left to take with me." He went and brought him salt. He said to him: "Did I tell you to bring me salt?" He said to him: "You told me that you wanted to eat and be satiated and have some left, by your life you have enough to eat, to be satiated, and to have left over to take with you."

(8) An Athenian came to Jerusalem and found a broken mortar. He took it and went to a tailor. He said to him: "Sew this mortar for me." He [the tailor] took a handful of sand and said to him: "Spin threads from this, and I will sew it for you."

(9) An Athenian went to Jerusalem and met a priest. He said to him: "How much smoke will that load of wood make [when it is burned]?" He said to him: "When it is wet, it is all smoke, and when it is dry, a third becomes smoke, a third soot, and a third fire." Where had the priest learned this? From the wood of the altar.

(10) An Athenian went to Jerusalem and wished to learn wisdom. He spent three and a half years there and learned nothing. When he was about to leave, he bought a slave who was blind in one eye. The man who sold him said to him [the buyer]: "By your life, he is very wise and sees far." When they had gone a distance from the city gate, he [the slave] said to him: "Go that we may overtake that caravan in front of us." He said to him: "What caravan in front of us?" He said to him: "There is a she-camel blind in one eye, and she has twins in her womb, and is carrying two sacks, one of wine on this side and one of vinegar on that side, and the camel-driver is a gentile, and it is four miles away." He said to him: "How do you know that she is blind in one eye?" He said to him: "From the grass that she grazes on one side, but not on the other." "How do you know that she has twins in her womb?" He said to him: "I saw, where she lay down, the tracks of both of them." "And how do you know that she is carrying a sack of wine on one side and a sack of vinegar on the other?" He said to him: "From the dripping, since wine seeps [into the ground] but the vinegar bubbles." "And how do you know that the camel-driver is a gentile?" He said to him: "Because a gentile urinates on the road, and a Jew would not urinate on the road." "And how do you know that it is four miles away?" He said to him: "From the hoof-marks, since a camel's hooves can be recognized for up to four miles, but farther than four miles they cannot be recognized."

(11) There was an Athenian who made fun of Jerusalemites. They said: "Who will bring him to us?" One of them said: "I will bring him with his head shaven." He went to Athens and pretended that one of his sandals had become torn while he was walking in the market. He [the man from Jerusalem] gave him one tremis and told him: "Go fix it for me." He [the Athenian] asked him: "Are these sandals expensive where you come from?" He told him: "When they are expensive they cost ten dinars and when they are cheap they cost eight dinars. He

said to him: "If I were to bring a stock of sandals there would I find buyers?" He said to him: "Yes, but bring nothing but them." So he did. When he came to the city gates he sent for [the man of Jerusalem who had been in Athens]. He came out to him, pretended to be concerned with his health. "What can we do with you? We have an agreement among us that no stranger may bring anything to sell here unless he shaves his head." He said to him: "What do I care, I'll shave my head and sell my load." He went and shaved his head. He went in and sat in the middle of the marketplace, and spread his sandals before him. One man came up to him and asked him: "How much is this sandal?" He said: "Ten dinars." He said to him: "Who has ever seen a sandal for ten dinars," and he hit him on the head and went. He got up and sat as before, another man came to him, and said to him: "How much is this sandal?" He said to him: "Eight dinars." He hit him on the head. He got up and sat as before. Everyone who passed by there did the same to him, until they injured his head. Then he came to [the man of Jerusalem] and said to him: "I will pay you back for all this evil." He said to him: "From now on don't ever make fun of Jerusalemites." Buber 1899: 46–51)

These riddle tales constitute, generically, the most coherent collection of narratives in *Eikha Rabba*, and indeed one of the most coherent such collections in all of talmudic-midrashic literature.⁵ Their distinctly folk literary character has drawn the attention of folklorists, and a number of studies have been devoted to them. Most of these studies have dealt with comparative aspects, correlating them to corresponding traditions in other cultures, especially those of India and Arabia. Thus their presence in the text is a cogent sign of the communication between the Jews of Late Antiquity and other cultures with which they were in contact. Unlike most of the tales of confrontation with others, especially in *Eikha Rabba* where the themes of the Roman oppression and the unsuccessful Jewish uprisings against it are central, this confrontation is designed for the Jews to have the upper hand.

The very creation of texts, especially orally transmitted texts, is often the arena where the losers in military and political struggles have the upper hand. These tales therefore communicate the paradox of narrative triumph from the midst of physical destruction. The existential and experiential character of the riddle tale, however, shatters the narrative triumph of the clever riddlers and the solvers from within.⁷ The narrative confrontations in which the Jerusalemites act out their self-image as the wisest people of the Late Antiquity cannot but join the knowledge of spiritual and cultural survival—we create texts, therefore we exist!—with the knowledge of the physical suffering of individuals, the destruction of the city of the wise, Jerusalem itself, and, indeed, the loss of the *axis mundi* of the temple.

Riddles present categories, meddle them, reconstitute them and constantly reenact their internal collapse.⁸ They therefore express and mediate the chaotic and sometimes desperate oscillation between self-assurance gained through powerful, collective intellectual activity, such as the rabbis of Late Antiquity consciously produced, and the threat of individual suffering and collective annihilation. The riddle tales in *Eikha Rabba* thus incorporate fragmentary and painful images of loss in a historiography which wrestles with the spiritual oppression of the belief in just retribution. It is exactly the presence of riddle tales and other subversively expressive folk literary genres that saves Rabbinic literature from resorting to the complacent bosom of univocal dogmas and brings the thrust of skepticism and rebellion into the heart of its potentially totalistic monotheism.

“Who Am I and What Is My Name?”—Defining Genre

The riddle is a specific literary and folkloric genre. It is usually relatively short; the text has two parts, the riddle and its solution; and it is performed in the framework of a social event in which the “riddler” presents the riddle to the “riddlee” and the “riddling” situation takes place. Pagis distinguishes between the riddle itself, which is the text, and the “riddling,” “the fundamental characteristic of the riddle that sets it apart from other genres, for two main reasons: its function in posing a challenge in either public or private (this is the ‘riddling’ situation) and its verbal design, that is, the text’s ability to pose a challenge (this is the potential for ‘riddling’).”⁹

Riddles need not always be verbal; as Pagis shows, they can include pictures—an iconic or metaphorical act which demands explication. Riddles of which pictures form a part are called “rebus,” and in the context of the Hebrew literary riddle this also includes emblem riddles. Similarly, it is possible to use the term “action riddles” for riddles in which an act supplies the hint of the solution. In addition to those riddles considered “proper riddles,” there are also riddles whose solutions depend not on knowledge hinted at in the riddle itself but rather on general contextual information, or in another case on unique contextual information—in other words, the knowledge of a given context to which the riddler is referring, that is, “neck riddles.”¹⁰

The literary and folkloristic tradition contains many stories in which riddles appear in different ways. Developing Pagis’s terminology further, we may distinguish between “riddling narratives” in which we may find within the narrative itself the riddler, the riddlee, the riddle, and the solution; and “riddle narratives” that include only the riddle, while the riddler is the narrator and the riddlee is a character external to the story (as is the riddler himself). The riddling situation is identical in this case to the situation of narrating. The solution is to become evident from within the narrative or from information external to it, and it would therefore be correct to distinguish, in accordance with what was said above, between “proper” and “improper” riddle narratives. Many “riddle narratives” may be found embedded in frame narratives, as in the Indian collection “*Vetāla-Pañcaviṃśatika*,” or “The Vampire’s Tales.”¹¹

In the cycle of stories discussed here, all the stories are riddling narratives by the above definition. Some of the stories only border on being true riddling narratives since the act described in them, although closely connected to the riddle, is rather a challenge or a test. The close relation between these tests and riddles is revealed in the structural similarity between the typical riddle narratives and those closer to test narratives, and in the interlacing of the two types in a single coherent story cycle. We might also mention here the links with biblical and postbiblical traditions of two typical riddling narratives: the story of Samson and the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

In the first story, in the two episodes in which the Jerusalemite in the house of the Athenian divides up the five birds, and then the single bird, the riddles presented are not verbal; the explanation of the act of the riddle is clarified in words by the riddler, since the riddlee did not know how to solve them. In the context of the narrative, however, the person put to the test is the one who later becomes the riddler, the Jerusalemite. This test resembles those found in stories in which the hero is prom-

ised salvation if he can ask a riddle that his examiner (judge, king, prisoner, etc.) cannot solve.¹² This is, then, an additional and more complex development of neck-riddle stories in which the character put to the test is asked only to answer a riddle whose special difficulty arises from the idiosyncratic nature of the hints needed to solve it. In the opening episode of this story, the solution to the riddle lies in finding the location of the house in which the father of the man of Jerusalem had died. Finding the solution carries a real financial prize—the legal inheritance of the man from Jerusalem.

The riddler in the story in which the four men of Jerusalem lodge at the house of the Athenian would seem at first glance to be the Athenian and the riddles to be riddles of action in the form of the bed, food, drink, and identity of the Athenian. But, once again, an additional enigmatic reversal is created within the story, with the apparent solutions presenting new riddles to the host, riddles that he solves with contextual information. These riddles bring him in the end to a process of *anagnorisis*, self-knowledge through the solution of riddles (in his case, tragic knowledge).¹³ From this point of view, this story, more than the other stories in the cycle, exhausts the possible existential and psychological dimensions of riddle narratives, in the form of “solve the riddle and know thyself.”

Of all the stories in the cycle, the one farthest from being a riddle narrative is, it seems, the story of the jumps. However, the conclusion, in which the Athenian is ridiculed, recalls the typical conclusion of the riddling situation in which the riddlee fails, as it has been observed in societies where riddling has developed into a ritual.¹⁴

In four of the stories there is, in addition to the ethnic-national opposition (Jerusalem-Athens), also an opposition of age—between children (Jerusalemmites) and adults (Athenians), an opposition that further emphasizes the superiority of the residents of Jerusalem.

In the story in which the pupils ask the Athenian a riddle, the riddle itself is later incorporated in a midrashic tradition of riddles that the Queen of Sheba asked Solomon.¹⁵ The story is also connected to the most explicit riddle tale in the Bible, Samson's, by the quote from Judges in the conclusion. The narrative contains a complete verbal riddle and its verbal solution. To save himself from failing before the children of Jerusalem, the adult Athenian needs the assistance of an adult Jerusalemite. The opposition of ages becomes dominant, and the teacher of the young Jerusalemite riddlers joins the Athenian and submits the complete solution to him. Children's recourse to primordial knowledge, such as the secrets of conception, pregnancy, birth, and nursing, is communicated through this tale. This is an exception to the consistent dominance of the Athens-Jerusalem dichotomy in all the other stories, however. In the three stories that follow, the superiority of the children of Jerusalem in explaining and solving enigmatic tasks is revealed in a surprising way. In these stories—as in the two long and more developed stories that open the series—the same enigmatic turnabout (in which the riddlee turns into the riddler and the Athenians are presented as foolish) is found in an abbreviated form.

When asked about the burning of wood, the Jerusalem priest bases his answer on his unique experience as a priest, and the riddler is therefore presenting here a kind of reversed neck riddle, since the riddlee has sole access to the necessary information; in any case, there is no true potential for riddling in the question raised in the story.

The pattern in which apparent answers turn, by an enigmatic reversal, into actual questions also exists in the story of the one-eyed slave. This pattern, which occupies a central place in the story cycle at hand, reveals a fundamental enigmatic position with regard to certainty, reality, and truth. While all the narratives display the double model of riddler versus riddlee, this particular reversal demonstrates the relativity of each of the roles in a given situation. It also reveals the possibility that the roles may be reversed in riddling situations and may become inverted in other situations of human opposition mentioned in the context of these narratives (conquerer and conquered, victor and vanquished, and so on). Riddling situations embedded in a narrative become, therefore, a box within a box, a reflection within a reflection magnifying the enigmatic effect, and thus: "Riddles within stories seem central to an understanding of all 'true riddles.'" ¹⁶

In the last story of the sequence, the conflictual pattern of outwitting and degrading the Athenian comes to the fore, taking precedence over that of the poetics of the riddle, and the concluding words of the story reconnect with the homiletical and historiographical framework by elaborating the first verse of Lamentations "Great among the nations," to mean "great in knowledge."

The Riddle Tales in the Talmudic-Midrashic Tradition

Wherever a Jerusalemite would go a chair of learning was offered him (*Eikha Rabba* 1,1).

The Midrash *Eikha Rabba* exists in two printed editions, the regular edition of the full *Midrash Rabba* and the edition of Shlomo Buber, based on manuscripts. The whole corpus of riddle tales exists in both editions, although with certain, relatively unimportant differences in the order in which the stories are presented.¹⁷ Since the sequence of the stories in editions of this Midrash seems to be a coherent compilation, it might be interesting to examine their independent existence in other talmudic or midrashic texts, in order to try to establish their status in the oral and written folk tradition in Hebrew and Aramaic in the Late Antiquity.

The most important text for comparison, and also the earliest of the texts outside *Eikha Rabba*, is in the Babylonian Talmud. In the printed version, there is a story of a one-eyed slave who identifies the characteristics and burden of a camel and its driver by its tracks.¹⁸ The talmudic text in which the story appears opens with a homiletic text also quoted in the Palestinian Midrash *Eikha Rabba*: "He explicated to them 'she sat alone'" (1,1). Rabba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: "Why was *Eikha* imposed on Israel—because they transgressed the 36 crimes in the Torah that cut them off from God, etc." (The numerical value of the Hebrew letters of the word *Eikha* is 36.) The talmudic text includes many midrashic tales on the book of Lamentations, a large part of them in the same words and in the same position as in the Midrash where the stories that concern us appear. After the interpretation of the verse "she was like a widow," the Babylonian Talmud reads:

"Great among nations—princess of countries": Rabba said that Rabbi Yohanan said: Every place where they went they were made ministers to their masters. Our rabbis told of two men who were taken prisoner on Mt. Carmel and their captor walked behind them. One of them

said to his companion: the camel walking before us is blind in one eye and loaded with two skins, one of wine and another of oil, and two men are driving it, one of Israel and the other a gentile. [Their captor] said to them: You stiff-necked people! How do you know? They said to him: The camel eats from the grass on the side it sees and on the side it does not see it does not eat, and it is loaded with two skins, one of wine and one of oil; the one of wine drips and seeps [into the ground], and the one of oil drips and remains [on the ground], and two men are driving it, one a gentile and one of Israel—the gentile relieves himself on the road and the Israelite relieves himself to the side of the road. He ran after them and found it to be as they said. He came and kissed them on the head and brought them to a house and made them a great feast and danced before them and said: Blessed is he who chose Abraham's seed and gave them of his wisdom, and everywhere they go they are made ministers to their masters; and he let them go and [they went] to their houses in peace.¹⁹

The story is framed by other stories that appear in parallel positions in *Eikha Rabba*. Whereas the plot of this story in the Midrash takes place in Jerusalem before the destruction of the temple, Jerusalem is not mentioned in the talmudic version. In each of the wisdom stories in the collection of *Eikha Rabba*, Jerusalem is a large city, its markets buzzing and its schools active. The wisdom of the Jerusalemites is treated as a well-known sociocultural fact. While in the context of the Midrash on the destruction of the temple, it would be natural that such a vivid description of the city in its days of glory would create an effect of great longing, the internal world of the stories does not reflect such sadness since Jerusalem still exists within them. In the story in the Babylonian Talmud, the location changes to the northern part of Palestine, the area where the sages reestablished centers of Torah learning, but without creating a center with the same spiritual and material glory that Jerusalem had enjoyed.²⁰

The riddle story from the Babylonian Talmud follows the stylizing tendency characteristic of many Babylonian versions of the stories of the destruction; it removes them from their specific, concrete time and transfers them to the level of paradigmatic summaries of the historical past.²¹ Instead of a story of a one-eyed slave bought by an Athenian, the story in the Babylonian Talmud is about "two men who were taken prisoner." A paradigmatic summary of the history of the people of Israel can be heard also in the words of the captor, "stiffnecked people," in an allusion to the verses of the Torah that tell the story of the golden calf. At the beginning of the story in Exodus, the verse quoted is "And the Lord said to Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: now therefore let me alone that my wrath may burn against them, and that I may consume them." (Ex. 32:9–10). And later: "And when the people heard these evil tidings, they mourned. . . . For the Lord had said to Moses, Say to the children of Israel, You are a stiffnecked people: I will come up into the midst of thee for a moment and consume thee" (Ex. 33:4–5). And finally: "And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped. And he said, If now I have found favor in thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, go among us; for it is a stiffnecked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance" (Ex. 34:8–9).

The significance of the order of quotations in the story in Exodus is that punishment follows sin, but forgiveness also grows from the same root. In its Babylonian version, the riddle story becomes a symbolic representation of the well-known historiography of the rabbis, including sin and punishment—and, in the wake of repentance,

forgiveness as well. The repeated use of the idiom “a stiffnecked people” is what makes this a clear example of the model. So the creative-spiritual power of the biblical text is emphasized within the rabbinic story, with the intertextual foundation determining the character as well as the spiritual and historiosophical message of the tale.²²

The fact that in some manuscripts this story is placed next to another story from the collection in *Eikha Rabba*²³ shows a persistence of the tradition of chaining riddle tales, known in Babylonia as well as in Palestine in the period.

And he would dance before them. They said to him: “It seems to us that our master looks like that king’s hangman.” He went and asked his mother and said to her: “If you admit, all the better, and if not I must kill you.” She said to him that under her bridal canopy her husband left and the king’s hangman came to her and she conceived. He brought them meat and when they smelled it they said: “This meat tastes like dog meat.” He went and asked his mother and said to her: “If you admit, all the better, and if not, I will kill you.” She said to him: “One lamb’s mother died and she nursed from the dog.” He brought them wine and they said to him: “This wine has the taste of a dead man.” He went and asked his mother and said to her: “If you admit, all the better, and if not I will kill you.” She said to him: “This is wine from a vine that grows on the grave of your father.” He went and kissed them on their heads and said: “Blessed be God who chose,” etc.²⁴

The story in the Palestinian midrashic version presented above is superior to the story in the Babylonian Talmud in every respect, starting with the specific and precise style: note the harmonious rhythm of the story and the varied dialogue in which the master of the house goes to the different businessmen instead of asking his mother for all the solutions. The advantage of the midrashic story is particularly evident in the order in which the events are related, with the most serious case, the ignoble ancestry of the master of the house, coming at the end of the series of problems and not at the beginning. We may speculate that the reversal of order in the Babylonian Talmud was caused by the fact that the story opens with the dancing of the master of the house, which points to the son’s characteristics.²⁵

The appearance of two of the riddling stories of *Eikha Rabba* together in another text substantiates the assumption that the collection as it appears in the Midrash is not a one-shot editing job, but rather reflects a coherent tradition of stories of this genre in the framework of talmudic and midrashic literature in general.²⁶ However, the repetition of the association between riddle tales and the book of Lamentations also stresses the traditional connection between the themes of loss and the enigmatic genre of folk literature.

The Meaning of the Riddle Tales in Eikha Rabba

A king of flesh and blood who is in mourning, what is fitting for him to do? . . . He sits silently (*Eikha Rabba* 1,1).

R. Yehuda and R. Nehemia; R. Yehuda says: The word *eikha* is a word of reproof . . . and R. Nehemia says: The word *eikha* is a word of lament (*Eikha Rabba* 1,1).

Eikha Rabba is by nature a Midrash of mourning and of the search for the meaning of mourning. The search leads toward reproof and the presentation of a world of

cosmic, divine order; a world view in which loss is placed within the framework of a certain logic, perhaps not intelligible to human beings, with regard to events, to reality, or to existence. The religious answer is engaged in an effort to breathe meaning into the loss, and to make it part of a vision of the world as an ordered entity that obeys certain laws, that can be predicted and justified. The structure of the argument may therefore be compared to a riddle: an apparent inconsistency is replaced by a consistent structure once the solution is provided, to be further replaced by enigma for which no solution exists.

Yet *Eikha Rabba* is also a text in which loss takes on an independent existence that breaks free of logic, as the lasting enigma escapes the boundaries of the solved riddle. The poetic imagery allows the loss, as it were, to speak in its own language.

The first section of the Midrash opens with homilies on letters and *gematria*, all of which show the destruction of the temple in a framework of measure for measure—retribution for the sins of the people—and construct a framework of rationality, acceptance, and order. The text then moves into a parable of a king who had a son; this parable is explicated in terms of God mourning his people, his son, and using human ways of mourning to give meaning to his world. The loss is not only a human feeling that identifies the object of its anger and comfort with the God who destroys and orders his world; it also breaks through the bounds of order, and man and God face each other, each reflecting the mourning of the other, feeling the other's loss through his own. Not subject and object, but two subjects touching each other with the pain of the experience of loss. It may be that in his own loss man knows the mourning of God, and, as the two subjects gaze at each other, he also knows himself. Thus, he is also faced with the knowledge of the No-God.

Eikha Rabba is an exegetical Midrash; its order is dictated by the verses of the book of Lamentations. But the verses are like the rungs of a ladder; the reader climbs from rung to rung but his/her feet stay for a moment in the empty spaces between. Those spaces are sometimes flooded by turbulence, irrationality, and the unexpected. Between the verses, the Midrash is not obligated to any law of order.

The subject, then, is loss. Loss takes many forms, in the world and in man. It might be said that life goes from loss to loss, transforming one into another. When man turns from the darkness of loss to the brightness of loss, life becomes an attempt to understand one loss through another—an attempt to understand God, the God within loss and the loss within God. The nothingness.

Why do the riddle stories appear in the first section of *Eikha Rabba*? Were there only a single story here, or even two, it might be possible to dismiss the entire matter as part of the anthologizing approach of the author of the Midrash, who may have been carried away by a motif. But a series of eleven stories, immediately followed by stories of dream interpretations, shows, I believe, that this is not a tangent but the very substance itself. The riddle stories function on several levels: they emerge as a poetic response to the phrase “great among nations,” interpreting it to mean “great in knowledge.” They juxtapose “us” and “them,” Jerusalem and Athens, distinguishing between what survives and what is destroyed and lost. By telling of the life of Jerusalem before the destruction, they recreate what has been lost, not only to enhance the pain of its absence but also to awaken joy at what once was. The stories also suggest various images of loss: a father dies and leaves an inheritance to his son; the son sails

to a far country to demand the inheritance. A man from Jerusalem sleeps on a broken bed until he lies on the ground, which is an act of mourning. Meat that tastes like dog meat comes from a kid whose mother died and who nursed from a dog before being slaughtered. This picture itself, even apart from the rest of the story, is a powerful image of orphanhood, of powerlessness, of cruel fate. Moreover, the wine that tastes of the grave grew on a father's grave. This image brings together the substance that brings joy to a man's heart with that which drains joy from his heart. The fear of extinction is what motivates the Athenian host's mother to give birth to an illegitimate son. Ignorance brings the son almost to the point of matricide. From the moment the secret is revealed, the son must live with the anxiety of a torn identity.

The boy from Jerusalem offers the Athenian salt to eat, a substance necessary for existence, but itself inedible—"salt of the earth"—the best of everything, but also the salt with which the earth of the destroyed city was sown. A pillar of salt. Salt rubbed in wounds.

The broken mortar will never be whole again—just as it is impossible to spin thread from sand. The powerful impossibility of the word "if."

One does not know where we came from or where we are going, just as it is impossible to know which egg was laid by a white hen and which cheese was made from the milk of a black goat.

Fire consumes wood when it is dry, not wet. Dry and wet. Life and death. The fire and the wood, Isaac being led to the sacrifice. The greatest riddle of them all: nine go out, eight come in, two pour, one drinks, and twenty-four serve. The solution: pregnancy, birth, circumcision, nursing, and weaning. The wisdom of many in one, one which becomes many. Filling and emptying in an endless chain. Separation after separation.

The order of things is not fixed; it changes from version to version. The scenes are fixed: images of loss, pictures of absence, portraits of nothingness. Who sees farthest? The one-eyed man. Who is most free? The slave led by his master. The camel has gone—and only the tracks remain. And the man who brings expensive sandals to Jerusalem, later to become the city of the wandering Jew, the eternal cobbler, may find that his sandals remain unworn. "The psychological motivations are not relevant to our discussion, which concerns the nature of the genre, but they are very obvious in reality," says Dan Pagis about the literary riddle.²⁷

For this reason, riddles in stories in general, and these riddles in the stories of the Midrash in particular, are very different from literary riddles. The story reveals the psychological motivations of the riddle it contains; the Midrash adds additional levels of revelation, both of motives and of meaning.

There are, moreover, the internal dynamics of the genre. As long as the riddle is a riddle, it has no solution. As soon as the solution is given, it loses its essence as a riddle.²⁸ This is an irreversible process. Yet the riddle story puts this irreversible process in a paradoxical situation that makes it almost tolerable. The story, as fiction, may be told countless times, so bringing the protagonist, the object of our identification, back each time to the former state, in which the riddle still exists. The riddle story allows us to oscillate between no solution and no riddle, between riddle and solution; to be in touch with all the worlds and remain alive.

The riddles in a wedding are bridesmaids to an irreversible process: two become one, virginity is lost.²⁹ The two will always bear, even after uniting, after separating, the marks of loss. The riddle is fundamentally erotic; it is structured to bring the separated together, to connect the disconnected. The riddler, throwing out hints, flirts with the riddlee, who, if successful, reaches consummation and the relief of momentary harmony. In this the riddle, like Eros, touches death. Transformed to an unexplicable enigma, it also finds its way to the ceremony of mourning. "The word *eikha* is a word of lament"—and such is the rhetoric of lamentation from earliest times, posing questions about what was and cannot be brought back: Where? Why? When? Who?

The book of Lamentations also opens with a question, "*eikha*" (how?). The riddle stories are a continuation of this question of questions. They dissect the question of the destruction into small riddles. They turn the unbearable loss into individual pictures of other, sometimes equally unbearable, losses.

Another question appears at the beginning of the first portion of *Eikha Rabba*—"Ayeka?" (Where are you?).³⁰ Question is weighed against question. The punishment is explained as the result of sin. Yet, from within the heart of the riddle, there comes a question directed at God, a historical question transferred to the existential level. It is not only modern man who walks in the garden and calls out to his God "Where are you?" Those who created, composed, mined from within them the midrashic tales of *Eikha Rabba* also called to their God with the question "*Eikha—ayeka?*"

Notes

A Hebrew version of this essay appeared in *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 10–11, *In Memory of Dan Pagis* (1987–88): 531–547.

1. Buber 1899, which is referred to throughout the article, is based on MS Rom cod. J. I.4 (Casanata) and British Museum MS 27089, with critical and interpretative notes. The extant printed edition is much inferior.

2. *Midrash Eikha Rabba*, chapter 1, from "Great among nations: has it not been said before that this means full of people" to "from now on don't ever make fun of Jerusalemites." The translations are by the author according to Buber 1899: 46–51. Pinchas Mandel is working on a doctoral dissertation that will produce a new edition of the narratives of this Midrash based on all the manuscripts now available. References in this article to manuscripts of *Eikha Rabba*, their variations and their attributions, are based largely on communication with him. All the stories here discussed exist in all the manuscripts and they are therefore an integral part of the work that has come down to us. The article's conclusions are, however, open to all criticism rising out of new textual discoveries. See also Buber's comments in his edition.

3. For this insight I thank my children Na'ama and Ariel Rokem.

4. Momigliano 1975: 92.

5. Yassif 1990: 103–145.

6. Bacher 1870; Perles 1873; Levi 1885; Fraenkel 1890; and also Haim Schwarzbaum's comprehensive note, Schwarzbaum 1968: 204–221. Schwarzbaum's note contains a large number of references to additional bibliographic material. See also Hasan-Rokem 1990.

7. The existential and experiential basis for genre definitions was developed by André Jolles. See also Ben-Amos 1976: 215–242.

8. Abrahams 1980; Handelman: this volume.

9. This examination of the riddle was inspired by Pagis 1986: 34–61, 89–90. All quotes that follow are from this source. See also Pagis's theoretical article published in this volume.

10. Pagis 1986: 36; Abrahams 1980.
11. Tawney 1926, vols. 6–7.
12. Pagis 1986: 36.
13. Aristotle: ch. 13. For the centrality of this concept in another midrashic story, see Hasan-Rokem 1983: 122–139.
14. Virtanen 1977: 77. See also Kaivola-Bregenhøj: this volume.
15. Noy 1963. See also Stein: this volume.
16. Abrahams 1980: 7.
17. See note 1.
18. Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sanhedrin, ch. 10, 104a–109b.
19. Ibid., 104a–b.
20. Oppenheimer 1982: 75–92. Fraenkel 1890: 68–69 also notes that in the *Eikha Rabba* text, Jerusalem is a vital capital.
21. See the comparison of another story from *Eikha Rabba* to a story in the Babylonian Talmud in Hasan-Rokem 1983.
22. In the printed version of *Eikha Rabba*, the phrase is ‘*m dtbyr qdl* (a broken-necked people). *Qsh qdl* is the idiom appearing in Aramaic Bible-translations of the verses about the golden calf. If the language in the printed version of *Eikha Rabba* is the original, can it refer to the golden calf? It seems reasonable to assume that Buber was correct in determining that “the words ‘*m dtvyr qdl* were added by a copier from Tractate Sanhedrin.”
23. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin MS Munich 95 heb: 354b.
24. MS Karlsruhe, Reuchlin 2 (the code of the photocopy at the Manuscript Department in the National and University Library in Jerusalem is S 11340) lacks the second story, as does the printed Babylonian Talmud. The same is true of the Yemenite manuscript of Tractate Sanhedrin located at the Complete Talmud Project at the Herzog Memorial (it also goes by the name of the Rav Maimon MS). Note in this manuscript the special attention paid by the scribe, who set aside a special place for the *Eikha* stories in the *Gemara*, marked by the word *Eikha* in large and ornamented letters. On the quality of this manuscript, see Kara 1984: 8–9. Kara calls this manuscript MS M, and it is mentioned and described in his work. The linking of the two stories does not appear in the Yemenite manuscript, but appears in a Yemenite *Midrash Eikha* from the year 1510—the book of Lamentations with translations and interpretations from ancient manuscripts (Kafah 1962: 330, 356). The versions of the stories in this Midrash are in general close to those of the Babylonian Talmud. Also in accordance with the Babylonian Talmud are *Eikha Zuta* (Buber 1894: 60), *Yalkut Shimoni Eikha* 604 (quoted in Buber 1894: 154), and Abuhav and Horev 1961: 659–660. There is no space here to discuss the textual variants, interesting in and of themselves, found in all these texts. On the other hand, the two stories are linked in a manuscript fragment taken from a book binding, now at the Gratz University Library, no. 1703; the number of the photocopy at the National Library: MS S 30369; and also P A 404/13. This version is very close to the Munich MS of the Babylonian Talmud. Rabinowitz in his *varia lectionis* of the Babylonian Talmud, *Diqduqei Sofrim*, writes: “And it was in *Menorat Hamaor* and so it was before Rashi and the *Aruch* (v. *qlst*).” Rashi in his commentary refers to both stories, which shows his copy of the Talmud had both, although the part about the captor is not printed in the Vilna Talmud: “The captor chased after the camel and its driver and found their words to be true and the Jews said of the captor, their master, that he was *qlstr* of the king, *sqnq* in foreign language, that his image was that of the *qlstr* who begat him out of wedlock.” Rashi in the first edition of the Babylonian Talmud: “He who is son of *qlstr*, *skntsq* in foreign language” (Gukovitzki 1985: 22, entry *sqnq*; also Katan 1984: entry 1732). Taubes 1967 brings only the words of the author of the *Aruch* on the same place, at the entry *qlstr*, and the addition of Rabbi Benyamin Musafia.
25. This view is shared by Fraenkel 1890: 222, but Fraenkel also rightly assumes that

this does not prove this story is older than the other versions. Schwarzbaum 1968: 212, however, did endorse this opinion. In the Gratz manuscript (see note 24): "When she went into bed," the word "bed" was inserted in a different hand and different pen, and it seems that something under it is erased. This may be a reference to the custom of "the right of the first night" (Patai 1974). Also, in the Gratz manuscript the word *qlstr* appears in place of *qlst*, and *mgdt* in place of *mwdh* in each instance, as is preferable; however, the text there is fragmented because of the cut made to recycle it as a bookbinding. Therefore, I have brought the Munich manuscript version *in extenso*. By *lectio difficilior* we may, as it were, reach conclusions about the originality of the story in the Talmud as opposed to the other versions, but it would seem that this is not sufficient evidence for such a far-reaching conclusion. There is a certain lack of logic in the use of the term "bridal canopy" in several of the versions and in manuscript, since the bride was probably not Jewish; one of the copiers has noticed this and replaced "canopy" with "bed."

26. Fraenkel 1890: 222 argues that these are two separate, independent sources. His discussion is based on a purely philological view of the tradition, whereas the discussion here relates to a broader notion of extant folk traditions, which are only partly reflected in written sources.

27. Pagis 1986: 45.

28. Ibid., 56, and Pagis: this volume: "The moment the riddle is completed it also ceases to exist."

29. Noy 1963.

30. Ayeka is a homograph of *Eikha* and God's question to Adam in the Garden of Eden after the sin.

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7

A King, a Queen, and the Riddle Between: Riddles and Interpretation in a Late Midrashic Text

DINA STEIN

This chapter deals with riddles in a midrashic text. For the purposes of the discussion I make two assumptions concerning the nature of Midrash: that the Midrash is an interpretation of the scriptural canon and that it is a discursive situation which implies a sender and an addressee. In this situation the messages are transmitted in forms of discourse. These discursive channels operate most clearly when an overt discursive situation exists in the text itself—that is, in the communication between the characters in the midrashic text.

The Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon is mentioned in the Bible. The Midrash refers to it on several occasions, in greater or lesser detail.¹ The reference, or version, which will be the focus of our discussion is the riddling tale that appears in the Midrash on the Book of Proverbs:²

Another interpretation: "But wisdom, where shall it be found?" (Job 28:12) This refers to the Queen of Sheba, who heard of Solomon's wisdom. She said: I will go and see whether or not he is wise. From where [is the Scriptural proof] that she had heard of Solomon's wisdom? As it is said, "The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, through the name of the Lord, and she came to test him with riddles." (1 Kings 10:1) What are riddles? R. Jeremiah said: By means of proverbs.³

She said to him: Are you Solomon, about whom and whose wisdom I have heard?

He said to her: Yes.

She said to him: If I were to ask you one thing, would you answer me?

He replied to her: "For the Lord giveth wisdom, out of his mouth cometh knowledge and discernment." (Prov. 2:6)

She said to him: Seven exit and nine enter, two pour and one drinks.

He said to her: Surely, seven days of menstruation exit and nine months of pregnancy enter, two breasts pour and the baby drinks.

She said to him: You are a great sage, but if I ask you another question, will you answer me?

He said to her: "For the Lord giveth wisdom." (Prov. 2:6)

She said to him: What is [the case of] a woman who says to her son: Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband, you are my son and I am your sister?

He said to her: Surely, the daughters of Lot say to their sons: Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband, you are my son and I am your sister.

She performed yet another test in front of him. She brought before him boys and girls, all of the same appearance, all of the same height, all wearing the same clothing.

She said to him: Separate the males from the females.

He immediately signalled his eunuchs who brought him parched grain and nuts. He began to distribute them. The boys, who were not embarrassed, gathered them up in their clothing. The girls, who were embarrassed, gathered them up in their kerchiefs.

He said to her: These are the males and those are the females.

She said to him: My son, you are a great sage.

She performed yet another test in front of him. She brought circumcised and uncircumcised before him, all of the same height and all wearing the same clothes.

She said to him: Separate the circumcised from the uncircumcised.

He immediately signalled to the High Priest, and he opened the ark of the covenant. The circumcised among them bowed to half their height, and not only that but their faces were filled with the radiance of the Shechina. The uncircumcised among them immediately fell prostrate.

He said to her: These are circumcised and those are uncircumcised.

She said: How do you know?

He said to her: From Balaam, is it not written, "who beholds visions from the Almighty, [prostrate but with eyes unveiled.]" (Num. 24:4) Had he not fallen he would not have seen anything. And if you do not wish to learn from Balaam, come learn from Job, for when his three friends came to comfort him he said to them: "But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior⁴ to you." (Job 12:3) I do not fall like you.

At that moment she said to him: "I did not believe the reports until I came and saw with my own eyes that not even the half had been told me; your wisdom and wealth surpass the reports that I heard. How fortunate are your men and how fortunate are these your courtiers who are always in attendance on you, and can hear your wisdom. Praised be the Lord your God, who delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel. It is because of the Lord's everlasting love for Israel that He made you king to administer justice and righteousness." (1 Kings. 10:7-9)

In this article I wish to examine the contribution of the riddles, as a prominent type of discourse in the riddling-tale of the Midrash on Proverbs, to the construction of the tale's meaning.⁵

Evidently the Midrash on the Book of Proverbs—including the riddling tale in it—does not reflect a specific performance situation. Furthermore, even in regard to the broader social context—the text's addressees and the cultural environment in which it was produced—the information we have is scarce and uncertain.⁶ In the absence of contextual information, we may find some compensation in the co-texts of the text that is the focus of our discussion.

What texts may be relevant to this text? They are those to which our text refers in some way. The criteria for including certain texts, rather than others, are based on the dominance that the text under discussion raises. Thus, for example, a midrashic

tale whose fabula-frame is a biblical one draws our attention to the “original” biblical tale. A text that elaborates on a certain theme may refer to other texts that deal with the same theme, provided that a temporal and geographical association between the two texts is probable. The immediate textual surroundings of a text should also be considered as a relevant co-text. The co-texts provide a possible frame of meaning for the text or for the implied addressee (whom we are trying to “reconstruct”). In fact, the co-textual space designates a field of meaning, in which our text also takes part.⁷

In implementing the idea of co-texts there lies another assumption, according to which each and every utterance inherently relates to other utterances. Each utterance has complex intertextual ties with other utterances, as Mikhail Bakhtin notes: “Indeed, any concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it was overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value. . . . It is entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents. The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment.”⁸ The co-texts are in a sense like the “agitated environment” which is also situated within the addressee who receives the utterance, which brings us back to the previously mentioned implied addressee in the Midrash.

The co-textual space will serve as a frame to widen or limit possible meanings when we examine the way in which the riddles in the riddling tale function. First, the discursive/rhetorical qualities,⁹ characteristic of this form of discourse, will be discussed from an atemporal (ahistorical) and acultural point of view—that is, positing the riddle’s “rhetorical potential.” Second, in continuing the former line of investigation, the diachronic aspect of this form of discourse will inform us of the place the riddle occupies within Jewish culture: Do models of riddling tales or riddles exist within the culture? To that should be added a synchronic aspect in order to illuminate possible influences of similar forms of discourse in neighboring cultures.

The co-textual environment, the “sound box” of the riddling story in the Midrash on the Book of Proverbs, includes more texts: the biblical story which is the official premise of our story; the Book of Proverbs to which the Midrash refers; the entire Midrash on the Book of Proverbs; the different midrashic commentaries on the “anchoring” verse of our story (“But wisdom, where shall it be found?”); the immediate surrounding text of the story in the Midrash—the proem in which our story is interwoven. This chapter will address three co-texts: the biblical story of the meeting of the two leaders; different traditions concerning the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon and their encounter; and traditions of riddles and riddling tales in the cultural environment of the Midrash on Proverbs.

The Riddle as a Form of Discourse

The texts available to us today inform us that the riddle is a rare visitor in Midrash literature. In Chapter A of *Lamentations Rabbah* we find eleven tales, in which people of Jerusalem pose riddles to citizens of Athens. In the *Targum Sheni* (Second Translation) of the Book of Esther (customarily dated to the seventh or eighth centuries A.D.) the Queen of Sheba poses three riddles to Solomon. In *Lamentations Rabbah*

the fourth riddle alone is articulated in a riddling situation proper.¹⁰ In the Bible, a riddle is explicitly presented in Samson's story¹¹ (Judges 14:12) and is referred to as the core of the meeting between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (I Kings 10; II Chron. 9). It has been argued that various forms of discourse in the Bible are pseudo-remnants of the riddle form which have been transformed and can be identified in the wisdom literature such as Psalms and Proverbs.¹² The question of the connections between the different forms of discourse is an important one; nonetheless, it should not blur the boundaries that differentiate them, that make them distinct forms of discourse. The textual evidence available to us today shows that riddles in the Bible and in the midrashic tradition could have served as possible rhetorical models—although limited in scope—for the text in the Midrash on Proverbs. Riddles in that model served in a situation of conflict, in which various tensions occurred: intercultural tension (Jerusalem/Athens; foreign queen/king of Israel; Samson/the Philistines) and an erotic tension (Samson/Delilah; Queen of Sheba/Solomon).

Let us turn first to the potential meaning embedded in the riddle as a form of discourse.

The riddle is composed of the riddle image and of the solution, to which the image refers. The relations between the descriptive elements in the first half of the riddle are confusing, in a way that postpones or even blocks out the identification of the referent.¹³ The surprising connections between the descriptive elements that point to a certain referent imply the possibility of alternative ways of categorization. The riddle image establishes an identity between different categories, which are usually opposed to each other; thus, the riddle shows users of the language that these classifications are not unassailable.¹⁴ In this way, the institutionalized order—the order by which human beings classify the world they inhabit—is attacked by the riddle, which demonstrates that these conceptual categories should not be taken as absolute. In other words, the riddle implies that cultural classifications are arbitrary. Anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, and others have shown that taboos function in demarcating the boundaries of the conceptual categories of a classificatory system.¹⁵ Riddles may be viewed as ambiguous elements that threaten the integrity of the system—as an “aggressive” form of discourse, a view that explains the ritual restrictions placed on it: the boundaries of the riddling situation are marked and defined.¹⁶ Yet the riddle also demonstrates the flexibility of a cultural system that has the ability to mediate between diverse and even opposed categories. The emphasis in this approach is on the ability of the riddle to create a new category (of which the referent is a member) that includes the relevant attributes of the descriptive elements. The ability to create categories is central to the cognitive aspects of adaptive learning; thus riddles are paradigmatic examples of the process by which this ability is acquired.¹⁷ In a similar fashion, it can be argued that riddles offer a concrete demonstration of the various ways in which things in the phenomenological world interrelate. In this the riddle may be seen as providing a meta-message concerning the universe: the riddle game points at the integration of various categories, and hence at culture as a unity of the diverse.¹⁸

A complementary view to these standpoints regarding the riddle can be found with those who argue that the riddle works to channel energy. That energy, which could be potentially harmful for the community and its values, finds its expression

in a nondamaging and even psychologically supportive form. The riddle creates a world of conflict that is settled within the framework of the “game,” offering a temporary solution—leaving the social, cultural and existential conflicts, external to the riddle game, unsolved.¹⁹

It seems that the riddle represents a subversive, nonconforming, and aggressive stance. Yet by virtue of the very same qualities, the riddle may function as a liberating force and thus support the authority of its own culture. Nonetheless, the riddle’s aggressiveness is unequivocal in relation to the poser of the riddle in a riddling situation: the latter gains power by creating confusion while making use of the wit proper to this form. This aspect should not be overlooked in the analysis of riddles that are embedded in a riddling situation, where a riddler and an addressee are explicitly mentioned. In this case, readers are not presented with a riddle they have to solve but with a riddle that is embedded in another discourse, in a plot. The rhetorical effect is thus of a riddling tale.²⁰ The fact that the riddling situation is surrounded by a different form of discourse bears other implications, which will be discussed in the textual analysis of the Midrash on Proverbs.

The evidence we have from ancient and modern cultures, both Jewish and non-Jewish, often associates riddling with wedding rituals. We may therefore presume that the riddles in the midrashic discourse evoke a possible association with a wedding context, which intensifies its erotic aspect—an especially relevant one to the text we are about to consider.²¹ Yet even in this case, the riddle’s suitability to the wedding context can be explained without the assistance of social-historical evidence. The riddle itself is erotic: “It is structured to bring the separated together, to connect the disconnected.”²² Riddles are presented at weddings, which join a couple and the members of their families, and, as they are presented there within the clear boundaries of a riddling game, they can offer relief from the various tensions that underlie the situation: the psychological, cultural and economic tensions between the families, as well as the erotic tension between the couple.²³ Furthermore, weddings are the expression par excellence of kinship laws, laws that serve as the founding categories of social organization. Since, as mentioned here, the riddle may imply that categorization is arbitrary, this analogy between the riddle and the wedding implies that kinship laws are arbitrary, too, just like other forms of social categorization. Thus the riddle offers an outlet for denial of the very foundations of culture, but also mediates between this denial and the forms of actual social organization.

Close to the riddle, though different, is the wisdom question, whose solution is based on previous knowledge of the subject or of scripture.²⁴ Wisdom questions, too, are not frequent guests in the Jewish tradition prior to the Midrash on Proverbs.

The Babylonian Talmud tells us of Rabbi Yehoshua’s confrontation with sixty citizens of Athens, in which he offered irrefutable answers to their questions (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bekhorot 8b). In another place in the Talmud (Tamid 72b) we learn of a similar confrontation of wisdom questions between Alexander the Great and the elders of the Negev.²⁵ From a synchronic perspective, the organizing pattern of PseudoBen-Sira (roughly a contemporary of our Midrash) is that of wisdom questions. The situation in which a man stands before a ruler and answers his questions is a predominant literary format in Arabic (and other Eastern) literature of that time. An example of this organizing pattern can be found in the eleventh

chapter of *Kalila and Dimna*. There, the dialogue between the ruler and one of his sages advances the plot. *Kalila and Dimna* was translated from Pahlavi into Arabic in the eighth century (and to Persian in the tenth) and was known among the Jews.²⁶ It seems, therefore, that we cannot rule out the possibility that this Eastern dialogical fabula-model influenced the riddle dialogue in the Midrash on Proverbs²⁷ (although in *Kalila and Dimna* the plot is motivated by the sage's proverbs, not by his riddles).

The Co-Texts

The Biblical Story

The story in the Midrash on Proverbs is an elaboration of the biblical story, where we are told of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon (I Kings 10:1–13; II Chron. 9:1–12).²⁸ The biblical story is obscure, partly, but not only, on account of the expressions whose lexical meaning is problematic. The core of the visit and its purpose, “to prove [Solomon] with hard questions”—elaborated in the Midrash as the riddling exchanges—is not reported in the Bible. What the Bible does provide is a detailed description of the wealth and grandeur of the two sovereigns and of the presents they exchange. This detailed description on the one hand and the scarce information on the actual meeting on the other display a curious distribution of information regarding the facts of the visit. We are told that the queen “came to prove him with hard questions [riddles] . . . and when she was come to Solomon, she communed with him of all that was in her heart. And Solomon told her all her questions” (I Kings 10:1–3). After seeing Solomon's wisdom, wealth, power, and the high regard in which he is held, the Bible says that “there was no more spirit in her” (10:5). Something happened there, but what?

The midrashic story answers this question. It does so by filling in the gaps that are typical of biblical poetics.²⁹ For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the story of this meeting is a juncture of two central themes in the characterization of Solomon. On the one hand, he is portrayed as the wisest of men;³⁰ on the other hand, the Bible emphasizes Solomon's fascination with foreign women. The price paid for this transgression was heavy: the kingdom was split in his successors' time.

The Queen of Sheba is a foreign woman who comes to test his wisdom. The biblical episode in I Kings 10 presents Solomon not only as a wise man but also as able to resist and overcome a foreign woman. The biblical narrative presents erotic hints in the description of the encounter (“she *came* to prove him . . . she *came* to Jerusalem . . . she was *come* to Solomon”). It even creates a “matrimonial” background (the exchanged presents as dowry, and the possible association of riddles with the wedding ritual). The biblical story declares Solomon's superiority, although it is impossible—just as the Midrash points out—to overlook the tensions that arise in the story itself. Nor can one ignore the tensions underlined by the position of this episode in the sequence of events that may be titled “the life of Solomon.” Our story appears at the turning point of his biography (after attaining an international reputation as a wise and powerful king) and before the downfall (the following of foreign women), which led to a national calamity in his successor's reign.

The biblical story is a necessary co-text for understanding the text in the Midrash on Proverbs: it leads to an understanding of the riddling situation and of the riddles themselves, in view of the two central themes dominant in Solomon's character—he is the wisest of men, yet a man (male) of notorious weaknesses. In addition, this co-text exposes the Queen of Sheba's double role: as a foreign leader, as a foreign woman, and, by implication, as a future bride.³¹ The story in the Midrash on Proverbs ends with the queen's blessings, with her recognition of Solomon's greatness, and, above all, with her recognition of his God who made him king. The midrashic story chose to omit mention of the exchanged gifts. This omission may be explained in various ways: either the gifts could be associated with a marriage context or they might remind us of another of Solomon's sins, that of amassing silver and gold. They could also be perceived as adding to the queen's strength. On the face of it, the midrashic story supports the biblical story which proclaims the queen's visit a success. In fact, however, the midrashic story, through the riddling process, casts doubt on Solomon's unequivocal victory.

Traditions of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon

The many traditions concerning the Queen of Sheba and Solomon—together and alone—are important underpinnings of the midrashic story. At first it may seem that there is a great gap between the early saying of R. Samuel Bar Nachmani, in the name of R. Jonathan: “Whoever says that *malkat* [Queen of] Sheba was a woman is in error; the word *malkat* here means the kingdom of [*malkhut*] Sheba” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Bathra 15b), and her later identification (in the Kabbalah and seventeenth-century German Jewish folklore) with Lilith.³² This explicit identification in the later traditions is not surprising, for it expresses a longstanding perception of the Queen of Sheba as a demon or as having demonic qualities.³³

The *Targum Sheni* describes the queen's meeting with Solomon. It tells us that Solomon, who was famous throughout the world for his wealth and great wisdom, held a banquet for the kings of the East and of the West. He also invited all the beasts, the spirits, and the demons, who danced before him. The wild cock of the woods does not attend this gathering and to atone for his rude absence tells the king of the place he has just visited: a wonderful country whose streets are covered with silver, whose gardens are watered from paradise, and which is ruled by a woman. The cock suggests that Solomon summon the exotic queen. The king sends him off, accompanied by a fleet of birds that darkens the skies of Kitor, the queen's kingdom. To this, Solomon adds a threatening letter, in which he informs her, among other things, that since his army is comprised of spirits and demons, he can inflict upon her and her kingdom a grave disaster if she refuses his invitation. After sending a preliminary expedition of six thousand boys and girls who look alike and who are dressed uniformly (like in the third riddle in the Midrash on Proverbs), she arrives at Jerusalem. There she finds Solomon sitting in a glass house. Since she mistakenly believes him to be sitting in water, she rolls up her dress. It is then that her hairy legs are revealed to Solomon and he remarks to her: “Thy beauty is that of women and your hair is that of men, hair is becoming of a man and disgraceful for a woman” (ch. 3). Ignoring his last comment she presents him with three riddles, all of which he solves. She

is taken to his palace where she witnesses his wealth, hands him gifts, and receives what she asks for.³⁴ The queen's hairy legs hint at her being perceived as a demon: hairiness is a common motif in the attributes of witches in folklore.³⁵ Moreover, the Arabic traditions state explicitly that the Queen of Sheba is a daughter of the demons. According to these traditions, the king's advisers oppose his marrying the queen since they know she is a demon, and, having this previous knowledge, they know of her hairy legs.

The Koran (Surah 27 "The Ants") introduces the Queen of Sheba's visit as part of the summoning of sun worshipers to Solomon's palace. They are gathered to meet the king, who is a prophet of God, so that they will come to believe in the true god. In this narrative, Solomon's sitting in the glass house serves as a successful tactic, which reveals his superiority over the confused queen—without mention of her hairy legs. The Koranic commentators elaborate on the meeting of the kings, whether by using the biblical narrative, the Jewish or Christian traditions, or, as may well be the case, by incorporating folk materials that circulated in Arab culture. Al-Tabari (839–923) adds to the Koran's version that the djinns, fearing that Solomon intended to marry the Queen of Sheba, tell him about her hairy legs. After pulling off the glass-house trick and seeing that the accusation was valid, he orders the djinns to prepare a special depilatory ointment.³⁶ A later commentator, Al-Tha'labi (first half of the eleventh century) has a different tale, according to which the Queen of Sheba is the only daughter of a king. When the king dies there is strong opposition to her succession. She then marries her opponent, who claims the throne; on the wedding night, however, she cuts off her husband's head and takes his place as ruler.³⁷

Pseudo-Ben Sira presents one episode from the tale of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba: Solomon's sitting in "water," the rolling up of the dress, the revelation of the hairy legs, and the depilatory ointment (the latter being the "excuse" for including the episode in this text). This version adds that Nebuchadnezzar is a descendant of Solomon, exemplifying the idea expressed in the verse: "thy destroyers and they that made thee waste shall go forth of thee" (Is. 49:17).³⁸

The Queen of Sheba is also well known in Christian traditions, which will not be discussed here. However, it is important to point out that even the allegorical interpretation of the story (i.e., the meeting of the rulers) is based on a familiar nonallegorical version: the meeting is a unification of bride and groom. In this view, the king and queen may be perceived as analogous to Christ and to the church.³⁹ Christian traditions are perhaps less relevant to our study, since we are focusing on the Midrash on Proverbs, which was probably redacted in a Moslem environment.

As mentioned, the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon captured the imagination of many storytellers. The examples given here underline a few of the aspects shared by the different traditions, which may have been circulating in the time of our text. It transpires that the Queen of Sheba is perceived as a demonic power that embodies an erotic threat. The riddles are part of the threatening ammunition she holds. All the different traditions (the Koran may be excluded) exude a strong erotic odor—whether explicitly or implicitly. It is difficult to trace the origins of these stories. We have seen that the biblical text, too, conceals great tensions; in this sense, it could be a censored version of bawdier traditions, as well as an inspiring basis for later developments. The *Targum Sheni* seems to disclose Arabic or Moslem influences, which

may themselves have been initially inspired by Jewish sources. However, the issue of source and influence is not essential to our discussion. The point to be made is that these traditions existed in the period of the Midrash on Proverbs (the second half of the ninth century to the first half of the eleventh century) and that they conceived of the Queen of Sheba as a threatening force: erotic, demonic, chaotic. To this should be added that all the traditions include stories about the queen being an infidel whose meeting with Solomon underlines the superiority of the true religion which he represents.

Solomon himself is a well-known figure in Jewish and Arabic traditions. The Jewish tradition praises his wisdom (including esoteric knowledge) which excelled that of all the inhabitants of the East. The Midrash, unlike the Bible, does not elaborate on his esoteric wisdom and even supplies a rational explanation for it (Tanchuma Buber, Huqqot 15). The Midrash emphasizes his wisdom as a judge which finds its expression in a series of trials. Likewise, his rabbinical wisdom is stressed, and he is considered to be the author of three books: Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. In addition to being the wisest of men he is also the richest king, and his dominion stretches far. Unfortunately his later days are very different from his bright beginning: "At first, Solomon reigned over the higher beings . . . afterwards, he reigned over the lower. . . . And still later, he reigned only over his couch. . . . And finally he reigned over his staff" (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 20b). Solomon is accused of having committed three sins: having too many wives, too many horses, and too much gold and silver. His attraction to women is stressed as the main reason for his downfall and for the future destruction of the temple.⁴⁰ Solomon's habit of marrying foreign women is an issue over which three of the rabbis in the Palestinian Talmud disagree.⁴¹ The lengthy debate in itself indicates that this point in Solomon's biography is considered problematical, in the eyes of those who read the biblical story, like the rabbis of the Talmud. The above passage from Sanhedrin hints, as it continues, at an additional aspect of Solomon which is central in the legends which surround his figure: namely his connections with another world, that of the demons. Elsewhere this is stated clearly: "Before Solomon sinned, fearlessly he ruled even over male and female demons" (Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 5). A tale that has received much fame tells the story of Ashmedai, who took Solomon's place after the latter had captured him in quest of a precious stone for the building of the temple.⁴²

Solomon's contact with a demon or demons (which is implied in the Ashmedai story) is a dominant theme in Arabic traditions. These traditions that choose to emphasize the demonic aspects of the Queen of Sheba talk at length about Solomon's connections with the djinns. Thus we find in the Koran: "And unto Solomon (we gave) the wind, whereof the morning course was a month's journey and the evening course a month's journey, and (we gave him) certain of the djinn who worked before him by permission of his Lord" (Surah 34, 12).⁴³

The cultural environment of the Midrash on Proverbs was thus familiar with various traditions that associate Solomon with a few central themes: wisdom (including esoteric wisdom), wealth, contact with the demonic world, and—what is especially important for our investigation—love of women, particularly an excessive love of foreign women, which, at least according to the Jewish tradition, caused a personal and national calamity.

The riddling tale in the Midrash on Proverbs is innocent of witchcraft or overt demonological contacts. It introduces Solomon's wealth and wisdom. As stated, it seems at first to bail Solomon out, without his having been convicted of yielding to temptation or even revealing an erotic weakness; the Queen of Sheba returns to her country convinced of his greatness. Still, a close reading of the narrative will shed a different light on its manifest course.

Riddling Tales

Riddling tales, in the epoch of the Midrash on Proverbs, were a known type of narrative in the Babylonian and Persian region. This geographical restriction does not rule out the possibility, even the probability, that other regions were acquainted with these types.⁴⁴ The riddling tale in our Midrash resembles two types of tales: the one is the story of the princess who is unable to solve her suitor's riddle and is therefore obliged to marry him; the other is the tale of princess Turandot in which she poses riddles to her suitors. The lucky candidate who succeeds in solving the riddles will win her hand; if he fails, he is doomed to be executed. After a succession of severed heads, the hero who overcomes the challenge appears.⁴⁵ There are, of course, apparent differences between this type of tale and the riddling tale in the Midrash. Yet, since variants of this tale are found in Arabic story collections,⁴⁶ we should consider them as possible references when analyzing the midrashic story. Both types end with the marriage of the princess and her suitor, and in both the erotic realization is opposed to the "thanatoid" alternative—the verdict of the failing suitor.

As we have seen in previous co-texts, the Queen of Sheba carries an erotic force which is also threatening, potentially destructive, even lethal. Solomon solves the riddles, and according to the model presented by these types he escapes the princess's devastating power. Yet surprisingly he does not marry her. The story in the Midrash remains loyal to the biblical version, which although it does not lack erotic hints as to the nature of the encounter, and may even imply a matrimonial frame, does not express this theme explicitly.⁴⁷ The existence of these co-texts in the background of our story heightens the erotic tension in the midrashic tale of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon. These co-texts serve as a frame of meaning in one of two ways: they may cause the addressee to sense the euphemistic nature of the midrashic story (and the biblical version, too), or, on the contrary, they may underline the uniqueness and greatness of Solomon who, unlike the heroes of the model stories, does not have the need to consummate his victory.

Our tale differs from these traditions in yet another crucial aspect: in the center of our narrative stands a mature queen—not a young princess—and she is the one to make the voyage to the king's palace. By the fact that the queen is the visitor, her aggressiveness, or rather her male ("prince") aspect, is emphasized, an aspect suggested already by her hairy legs (as Solomon expresses it in the *Targum Sheni*). As mentioned, this hairiness also signals her demonic nature. Actually, the two references stem from the fact that the Queen of Sheba refuses to fulfill the normative feminine requirements established in the Book of Proverbs and in the Midrash on Proverbs:⁴⁸ she breaks through the normative categories in a manner similar to the riddles she poses.

The Riddling Tale—The Midrash on Proverbs 1:1

Let us turn now to the riddles themselves, to each riddle as an independent unit and to its place in the sequence of riddles—the narrative of the riddling tale.

The first riddle—"Seven exit and nine enter, two pour and one drinks"—expresses transformations between distinct categories, on two levels:

1. The verbal level shows a transition from the nonhuman (time) to the human (baby). The transition between the categories is carried out by the use of verbs, which are all borrowed from the human (or animate) realm: exit, enter, pour, drink. (It should be noted, though, that the verbs "exit" and "enter" are idiomatic in Hebrew for marking temporal transitions.)
2. In content, the human being is described as a product of a process. In addition to this, the *halachic* time, which is also symptomized biologically (menstrual period), is shown to be transformed into a "purely" biological period (pregnancy).

The Queen of Sheba presents Solomon with riddles which in themselves point to a different cultural arrangement (a different way of categorizing). She thus symbolizes an alternative order which—from our encounter with the co-texts—we know is perceived as antiorder, a threatening chaos. Furthermore, the first riddle alludes to the sexual act, similar to riddles that are customarily told at weddings.⁴⁹ Yet those usually contain erotic hints and "innocent" solutions, a strategy that functions to ease erotic tensions. Here, in contrast, the solution of the first riddle, although not explicitly erotic, is nevertheless charged, especially in the context of a riddling situation between a woman and a man. The Queen of Sheba indeed operates in a seductive manner: in her riddle she presents the opaque, chaotic, and dynamic sexual act. She speaks to Solomon in a metaphoric language loaded with sexual connotations (enter/exit; pour/drink). The solution—in contrast to the uninterrupted flow of subjectless actions in the riddle—provides a subject for each of these actions and is thus marked by segmentation, clarity, and distinctiveness. Solomon also responds to the queen's words as a description of the physical process the woman undergoes when pregnant and giving birth. Solomon excludes himself (as a male) from the interaction the riddle alludes to, and he "domesticates" the threatening sexual power it implies. He rejects the fluid, unbounded option offered by the queen as she introduces the womanly figure as a lover. Instead, he erects a seemingly less frightening and more explicit model presented by the riddle—that of a mother. The maternal aspect is seeded in the riddle itself, however, and it too signals trouble, for the infant depends on his mother's nourishment to survive. This paradigmatic reliance of men on women alludes to the specific characters at hand: Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Solomon, as mentioned, solves the riddle from the infant's point of view: the nine months of pregnancy—in Hebrew, this period is stated literally as "the months of the newly born." Furthermore, in the first riddle the Queen of Sheba describes a process of inclusion—the channeling of the multiple (seven, nine, two) to the one which is at the center: the infant human being. Thus the queen is implicitly saying to Solomon that the human being as a subject, conceived as a unified entity, is in fact a collection of fragments. The presentation of the process exposes the inadequacy and the illusion that lie in

the concept of man as unified and coherent. In fact, the Queen of Sheba acts as a deconstructive force against the assumption—a patriarchic one at its base—which regards man (male) as a sovereign entity. The queen, at the threshold of her confrontation with the man who is considered the wisest of all, suggests that the subject is not as coherent as he may seem. Pregnancy and nursing break the oppositions between “self” and “other,” subject and object.⁵⁰ Solomon, who answers her from the infant’s point of view, seems to silence the seductive tone presented by the queen. He succeeds in solving the first riddle, escaping the erotic trap set for him; however, this does not suffice to conceal the traces of doubt and disorder left by the queen, on what seemed to be the solid ground of cultural organization, by her pointing out the basic assumption that enables it. These doubts stem from the “secure” component to which Solomon escapes: the maternal figure. Soon the Queen of Sheba will accept the challenge and will continue to deconstruct the illusionary maternal shelter.

In the second riddle, the confusion of the normative classifications takes place first and foremost on the thematic level: the violation of laws of taboo. These rules are considered as basic social classifications, shared (in variations) by all cultures. Bringing up the case of Lot’s daughters, in which these laws were violated, implies that they may be regarded as coercive, as arbitrary classifications and distinctions. Verbally, the riddle seems to be phrased redundantly. It would have sufficed to say: “What is [the case] of the woman who says to her son, Your father is my father?” The confusing verbal excessiveness defines this question as a riddle (had it been formulated simply it might have been defined as a wisdom question). Furthermore, the excessiveness emphasizes another aspect: the riddle contains a number of possible roles in which women serve in relation to men, such as daughter, sister, mother, and wife. In fact, the riddle creates analogies among the familiar units. These “natural” affinities, as exemplified in the riddle, are not necessarily distinguished, and indeed they can be unified. The riddle also ends in “I am your sister,” the term “sister” carrying clear cultural connotations of a lover.

In continuation of the first riddle which shows man (male) to be the product of differentiations, the second riddle shows these differentiations to be arbitrary, even though socially necessary. As mentioned, the first riddle also contains the option—which Solomon chooses—of perceiving the woman as a maternal figure. As we have already seen, this option in itself underlines the infant’s dependence on its mother and undermines its sovereignty. The Queen of Sheba uses a shrewd trick as she hints that every woman can be conceived as a maternal figure, and hence the dependence of men on the woman (qua woman) is implied. At the same time, the second riddle suggests to Solomon that the maternal status does not necessarily contradict a threatening sexual interaction. The refuge that Solomon sought to find in the solution to the first riddle is insecure, and not just on account of the weakness that the mother-child relation indicates: the nonerotic relations of mother and child are due to social differentiation and do not guarantee full protection from the intimidating erotic power—analogically to the case of Lot’s daughters.⁵¹

The incest taboo inherently transforms the closest and most familiar to the farthest; by the same logic, it familiarizes the stranger (spouse). The strategy implemented by the riddle is similar, where an estrangement of the familiar concept of language and reality takes place. The riddle then offers, in return, a translation of

this strangeness to something familiar. Throughout the riddling process, Solomon engages in translating the strange and alien into something familiar. Three aspects meet in the second riddle: the content of the second riddle, the mechanism of riddles in general, and the riddling situation in which Solomon confronts an alien woman. These aspects form an analogy, which in turn creates a strong tension. The Queen of Sheba, so to speak, remains a foreign woman who returns to her place almost untransformed ("almost," since she recognizes Solomon's wisdom and the greatness of his God)—a spouse that does not undergo the same process as her own riddles.

The first two riddles are verbal ones while the last two are practical, and they are also separated from the former riddles by being named "tests" (literally: "examples"). The transition from riddles to "examples" is a transition from hearsay to eyesight, and thus it develops what had been said at the beginning of the riddling tale: the Queen of Sheba came to witness Solomon's wisdom with her own eyes. In this stage of the riddling tale Solomon's position has grown in importance in comparison to the first two riddles. The Queen of Sheba places homogeneous human bodies before him, among which he has to distinguish between males and females. The role played by Solomon in each of these tests, particularly in the last, is more dominant than in the first riddles, in relation to the part played by the poser—the Queen of Sheba (although here, in contrast to the first riddles, she does not ask him, but rather orders him).

In the third riddle, the Queen of Sheba presents a confusion on the level of content: the blurring of a natural, biological distinction between males and females by the external blurring of differences. In contrast to the previous riddle, which pointed out a social categorization, the third riddle raises what may seem to be a natural category—"may seem to be" since the solution that creates the differentiation depends on a behavioral difference. It is not clear, therefore, if the "girls [females] who were embarrassed" acted according to an arbitrary social norm or out of instinct. In other words: Is the restoration of social order—that is, the exposing of the natural separation—achieved by employing natural or artificial differentiation? The Midrash on Proverbs and the Book of Proverbs define clear behavioral norms, the violation of which entails a moral condemnation. Solomon, in his presentation of the solution, is assisted by the normative system, which also determines the required measure of feminine modesty. Furthermore, the riddle and its solution reinforce that normative system by presenting it as a natural one. However, the (actual) introduction of the blurring of the distinctive boundaries between male and females (even though it is removed in the solution) suggests the possibility of equality between the king and the queen. This is especially true since the latter does not answer the required behavioral norms as they are depicted in the various co-texts (particularly in the Book of Proverbs and the Midrash on Proverbs), norms that serve as the basis for Solomon's virtuoso solution. In solving the riddle, he uses his eunuchs, who may be considered a neutral (artificial) category. He thus dismisses any erotic aspect from the riddle (or rather from its solution) which could have emerged had he himself, for instance, distributed the grain and nuts. This view actually supports the apprehension of the behavioral differences between men and women as stemming from biological differences. In contrast to the first two riddles, which implicitly convey messages to (and about) Solomon concerning his vulnerability as a man in contrast to a woman

(the Queen of Sheba), this example shows a retreat from her initial aggression: it is no longer an attempt to determine superiority, only equality. The third riddle marks a turning point in yet another sense: the first riddle touched on the primordial and the second riddle dealt with mythic resonances (the story of Lot's daughters), whereas here the confrontation between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon is shifted to his home ground—temporally and geographically. The text may be implying that this is his only chance to win the game. However, the riddle alludes to the dichotomy which the queen wishes to establish for her needs: men (Solomon) vis-à-vis women (the Queen of Sheba). Furthermore, with her words "My son, you are a great sage,"⁵² she sends Solomon back to the rhetorical move which was activated in the previous riddle: the emphasis on both the dependence of the man on the woman and the intimidating sexual threat that is embedded in the feminine figure.

The last riddle presents a differentiation between Jews and gentiles. In the frame of this test, as in the previous riddle, the differentiation receives a natural, instinctive validation by the different behavior displayed by the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Since it is placed in the riddling sequence, it is illuminated by the natural difference between males and females established by the previous riddle, although the same riddle also raises some doubts as to the very notion of "naturalness." Furthermore, we must examine the entire riddling process, starting from the level of the living (fetal) mass, through the mixed kinship group of the mature sexual identity in the social-cultural frame, up to the climactic test: the existential-cognitive identity of the nongentile versus gentile. A paradoxical picture thus emerges. It seems that, on the whole, this is a sequence of growing differentiation: from the less distinct to the ultimately distinct; however, the last distinction cannot escape the lingering effects of arbitrariness that emanate from the bottom of the escalating ladder of differentiation in the first riddle. The process may be viewed from another angle: the previous riddles serve the Queen of Sheba for establishing the man/woman relation, whereas here she posits the distinction of nongentile and gentile. The first three riddles function in the name of the queen's feminine aspect, hence their intimidating power over Solomon. But the last riddle serves as a tool for religious and tribal disputes. The distinction between circumcised and uncircumcised cannot apply to women and thus it "swallows" the opposition—which has not been bridged—between men and women: Solomon's strength has not been satisfactorily asserted as a man versus the Queen of Sheba, the woman. In fact, the last riddle abolishes women as a social category altogether and this, perhaps, may explain why the Midrash chooses to bring this last test to resolve the battle of the two leaders. The Queen of Sheba, at this stage, no longer plays the role of the "foreign woman"; she is simply "foreign." On the religious-cultural level, Solomon's victory is evident, but it, too, is problematic. We will address this issue further on.

So far we have examined the rhetorical tactics of the riddles and of the riddling process in the riddling tale itself—that is, in the confrontation of the characters who act in it. We have not considered these tactics as directed at the addressee who is exterior to the text: the reader. For the reader, the riddling tale serves as a frame, in an analogous way to the ritual boundaries (constraints) associated with riddling which have been mentioned earlier. The disturbing elements that have been raised in the frame of the story are circumscribed for the addressee within its boundaries—that is,

Solomon is the one to be directly attacked by the queen, and not the reader. The riddling tale builds a mechanism, so to speak, that channels the aggressive elements carried by the riddles and thus “absorbs” the disturbing forces in a way that does not threaten the system’s integrity. But this is only partly true since, as it transpires, the external addressee cannot remain completely untouched by the foreign queen.

We have also overlooked the possibility that the riddles were familiar to the text’s addressees.⁵³ The first riddle, as mentioned, resembles one known from *Lamentations Rabbah*. The riddle on Lot’s daughters achieved great popularity and has also been found in Syriac writings of the eighth century.⁵⁴ A similar event to the one which occurs in the solution of the third “practical” riddle (the separation between males and females) is found in classical literature: Achilles was disguised as a woman to escape being drafted to the Trojan war. His identity was revealed by his “instinctive” masculine behavior.⁵⁵ The actual separation between males and females through typically ascribed behavior to each of the sexes is common to both sources. Implied parallels have been found to the fourth riddle, in various homilies (*drashot*), and we shall return to it later.

The possibility that the audience may have been acquainted with these riddles affects our understanding of the meaning we ascribe to their inclusion in the riddling tale. It seems that in this case the riddles still maintain their aggressiveness as a rhetorical tool in the encounter between the characters in the tale; yet, for the tale’s addressee, the intimidating aspects are somewhat weakened. Instead, another rhetorical use is added: the addressee can now enjoy the evocation of a familiar tradition (known riddles), insofar as he or she reaches the solution before the wisest of men—Solomon. Furthermore, the possible familiarity of the first three riddles places the fourth one on a different plane. As the last and decisive riddle in the series, it receives the most attention in the tale’s narrative. The process of its solution connects the riddle, as we have mentioned earlier, to another field, that of scriptural interpretation.

At the outset of the riddling tale we learn through the quotation that the actual ability to find the solution to a riddle rests in the hands of God. In the fourth riddle, the Queen of Sheba demands that the solution be specifically explained: “How do you know?” Solomon answers her by interpreting the exegetical homily ascribed to Balaam: “Who beholds visions from the Almighty” (Num. 24:4, and continues: “prostrate with eyes unveiled”).⁵⁶ For this exegesis, which includes a hidden dialogue with the queen (“and if you do not wish to learn from Balaam”),⁵⁷ Solomon finds more support in Job’s words to his friends: “But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you” (Job 12:3). As opposed to the previous homily, which was close to the plain meaning of the verse, in this one Solomon displays greater homiletic skill as he engages in a “don’t read” (*al tiqre*) type of exegesis. Solomon explains that Job’s words should be read: “I do not fall like you,” thus creating an analogy between Job’s friends and infidels, hence an implied analogy to the Queen of Sheba. She comes to Solomon trying to undermine his (religious) confidence as Job’s friends try to upset his belief. Solomon, like Job, resists the dangerous temptation. In the Midrash, Solomon draws on a verse from the Book of Job (12:3), just as Rabbi Tanhum b. Hanilai (the putative “author” of the proem which includes the riddling tale), anchors his words on Job 28:13, or the narrator of the riddling tale draws on another verse taken from that book (28:12). Thus one more analogy is created:

between the interpretative homiletic method of the preacher, the *darshan*, in building the tale, and Solomon's interpretative method in the solution of the fourth riddle. This similarity blurs the boundaries that supposedly differentiate the frame of the (biblical) story, which begins with the verse "And wisdom, where shall it be found?", and the riddling situation in which Solomon's homily takes a part.⁵⁸ Yet Solomon's homily (exegesis) already ties the riddling situation to a broader frame: the homiletic interpretation. The choice of Job, from among all biblical characters, who cries out against the arbitrariness of providence, contributes to the building of tensions which this aspect carries in Solomon's reply.

It is in the solution of the fourth riddle that we see the transformation of Solomon into a homiletic exegete, a *darshan*. In fact, the queen's question "How do you know?" serves to evoke the dialogue between the addressee of the midrashic text and the interpreters (*darshanim*). More accurately, it serves to present the narrative process of the Midrash as an interpretative process that presumes the existence of an addressee with whom it may communicate. The Queen of Sheba, through her question, takes the place of the skeptical addressee, so that now her entire aggressive move, which we have been observing, is associated with the addressees' possible reaction. The proof for the solution is sought in a quotation, in reliance on a sacred text. This proof is presented as the answer to the fourth riddle which deals with the religious-cultural sphere. Solomon indeed succeeds in solving each one of the riddles, handing out a solution within the framework of the game; yet the sequence of riddles leaves the addressee with the impression that his success is due mainly to the fourth riddle, which shifts the confrontation to the religious-cultural sphere. Furthermore, given the various co-texts of Solomon, of the Queen of Sheba and of their meeting, as well as the association of the Queen of Sheba with the archetypal figure of the foreign woman, the addressee knows that Solomon failed in his, so to speak, "real" life: he followed foreign women, including, perhaps, the Queen of Sheba. The riddling tale, as stated here, places the fourth riddle as decisive closure. We have also seen that the decision on the religious-cultural level does not manage to silence the echoes of doubt, raised by the previous riddles, even if this solution is perceived as less arbitrary. The interpretative homily of the verse presented by Solomon puts the act of midrashic interpretation in the place of a solution and identifies the Queen of Sheba as a threatening force to the *darshanim*, including Solomon. The correlation that is created between the solution of the riddles and the interpretation of the verse has an implication no less disturbing than the Queen of Sheba herself, with regard to the validity of interpretation: Is interpretation of a verse (*drashat pasuq*) indeed similar to a solution to a riddle, an arbitrary decision, which is conciliatory perhaps, within the boundaries of the exegetical "game," but lacking in "real" meaning? Do the interpreters (*darshanim*), like Solomon, depend on the religious system in order to domesticate erotic, demonic, subversive, and antihierarchical forces (not necessarily external ones), like the Queen of Sheba, so as to maintain their power?

From yet another angle: as stated, the riddle mixes categories that are ordinarily perceived as distinct and even contradictory. Midrashic interpretation, which relies on quotations, sees in the Bible a *langue* that contains an almost indefinite number of possibilities for the creation of associations and for grouping new categories.⁵⁹ Yet the verse belongs to a *parole*, the "original" biblical context in which it appears.

The introduction of the quotation resembles the construction of the image of the riddle. The solution in the riddle is matched by the issue, verse, or character to which the interpretation refers. Interpretation, like riddles, entails an aggressive element, as well as a liberating one. Its dual nature can be explained through the use it makes (in the Midrash) of quotations that imply manipulation of authoritative forces. The verse “And wisdom, where shall it be found?” which in its “original” *parole* belongs to a semantic field created by the Book of Job, is suddenly mixed with an unexpected category, that of the Queen of Sheba. We find that in relation to the addressee, the homiletic interpreter creates a structure which is reminiscent of that of the riddle. The riddles in the tale—in terms of form (as discourse) and in terms of content, and the analogy that the tale draws between riddles and interpretation—suggest that the riddling tale itself, with its midrashic elements, is in a sense like the answer to a riddle: an ad hoc solution.

Solomon’s homily exists in a sense within a wider homily, in the middle of a proem. Various traditions tie Solomon’s character to that of the scholar (*talmid hacham*) and to that of the interpreter (*darshan*). As an interpreter, a further analogy is created between him and the redactor of the Midrash (or the author of the proem, with which the Midrash on the Book of Proverbs begins). This Midrash refers, of course, to the Book of Proverbs, which is attributed to Solomon and in which compulsory behavioral norms are delineated, as dictated by the cultural-moral system. The riddling tale exemplifies the concept according to which man’s existential riddle cannot be solved except by the cultural system, since the alternative to the arbitrary order is chaos and destruction. The riddling tale does not present the solution provided by the cultural system as devoid of arbitrariness, but it argues—through the riddles and their content, and through the co-texts which echo in it—for the necessity of the tribal-religious identity. Thus it implicitly advocates the need, albeit unfulfilled, for interpretation, for Midrash.

Notes

This article is based on my master’s thesis written under the supervision of Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Types of Discourse: The Interweaving of Different Types of Discourse in a Riddling-Tale” (The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in Hebrew). I wish to thank Jacob Elbaum, David Shulman, and especially Galit Hasan-Rokem for their encouragement and criticism; and Doron Narkiss. A Hebrew version of this essay appeared in *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 15 (1993), pp. 7–35.

1. The story is recorded in I Kings 10:1–11 and in II Chron. 9:1–10. It appears in the so-called Second Translation (*Targum Sheni*) of the Book of Esther. See Cassel 1988: 275–288; Yassif 1985: 217–218. *Midrash Ha-Hefez* of the fifteenth century contains an inventory of twenty riddles attributed to the Queen of Sheba. See Schechter 1890: 349–358. The tale of the meeting between the two leaders is elaborated in an eighteenth-century manuscript published by Y. Avida, “The Tale of the Queen of Sheba,” in Cassuto, Klausner, and Gutman 1953: 1–17. The last two items are Yemenite sources. See Yassif 1985: 50–59.

2. The text is cited from Visotzky 1982: ch. 1. For a slightly different translation, see Visotzky 1992: 18–19.

3. The word “proverbs” here denotes riddles.

4. The phrase “not inferior to” in the Hebrew is the idiom *lo nofel me*, literally: “I do not fall from you.”

5. On genres as distinctive forms of discourse, see Ben-Amos 1976: xxx–xxxi and Todorov 1990: 1–26. In fact, when examining a textual unit, in this case a riddling tale, one must examine the various types of discourse in it. In the riddling tale in the Midrash on Proverbs it is the interweaving of the riddle as a form of discourse with other forms which are in its background: citation, direct speech, characteristic of Midrash in general. I have pursued this line of investigation in my above-mentioned thesis.

6. Visotzky 1982: 44–45 dates the Midrash on Proverbs to the terminus 860–940. In my opinion, even following Visotzky, the terminus should be left more flexible: from the second half of the ninth century to the first half of the eleventh century. The supposed place of its redaction is Palestine although there is no decisive evidence to prove this. The uncertainty as to the place of redaction eliminates an exact evaluation of its cultural context (whether a Moslem or Christian environment, etc.). However, the areas that might be considered—Palestine, South Italy, and, by extension, Persia and Babylon, are part of what Goitein calls a “free trade community” (Goitein 1967: 61). To the vast trading activity one should add the ties between the different Jewish religious centers. The transition between possible locations of the redaction is significant if we wish to point to a possible model for the riddling tale in the Midrash on Proverbs: the tradition of riddling tales that originated in the east and to which the Babylonian center was exposed. See Yassif 1985: 19–29 and Stein 1993: 17–33. For an attempt to describe the polysystem of Jewish literature in the tenth century, see Drory 1988. It should also be noted that Visotzky 1982: 46–55 sees the riddling tale in the Midrash on Proverbs as a polemic narrative directed at the Karaite Daniel al-Qumisi. In my view, such an identification is questionable (see Stein 1993: 20–23).

7. Finding the relevant co-texts is of course problematic. To a large extent, it depends on a prior understanding of the text. Furthermore, the co-textual boundaries are tentative ones: we must rely on the texts available to us today. Any text added to the co-textual frame of reference—whether as a result of relating to other features in the text or as a result of discovering texts as yet unknown—may modify the understanding of the text under discussion.

8. Bakhtin 1981: 276.

9. Discourse analysis is found in ancient literary criticism which explored the techniques of producing persuasive texts. “Rhetoric,” as criticism which deals with the influence caused by actual uses of language (utterance) in specific social circumstances, is reflected today in the theory of discourse criticism. See Eagleton 1981: 101–102.

10. Hasan-Rokem: this volume.

11. Zakovitch 1982: 103–118; Camp and Fontaine 1990: 127–151. The authors analyze the biblical riddling tale by implementing folkloristic methods.

12. Tur-Sinai 1951: 58–93. For a discussion of the connection between the riddle and the proverb, see Hasan-Rokem 1974: 115 and Pagis: this volume.

13. Abrahams 1968: 151.

14. Köngäs-Maranda 1971: 54.

15. Hamnett 1967: 389.

16. Abrahams 1968: 150.

17. Hamnett 1967: 387.

18. Lieber 1976: 262.

19. Abrahams 1968: 148.

20. Hasan-Rokem: this volume.

21. The lack of sufficient historical information on the period of the Midrash on Proverbs includes information about the customs of the time—that is, the social contexts of riddling. Comparative studies of culture have shown that the riddle serves in a variety of contexts: as part of initiation and death rituals; as a kind of blessing exchange in a meeting; during courting; at weddings. See Burns 1976: 143–144. We know of customs relating to riddles

among the ancient Greeks. See Tur-Sinai 1951: 60; Hasan-Rokem 1980: 122. We also know of riddling customs from the Jewish tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Holland and Italy. See Pagis 1986: 62.

22. Hasan-Rokem: this volume.

23. Noy 1963.

24. On the distinction between riddles and wisdom questions, see Yassif 1982: 51 and Abrahams and Dundes 1972: 137. The actual distinction, however, is problematic since any solution to a riddle assumes and relies on (previous) knowledge.

25. See also Brinner 1977: 168–172. This text is dated to the first half of the eleventh century, in Kairouan. The story told here carries a strong resemblance to the story told about Rabbi Joshua in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bekhorot 8b.

26. Rav Hai Gaon (end of the ninth century) mentions this work. For example, see Levin 1934: 31. See also Dan 1974: 113 and Yassif 1985: 22.

27. Yassif 1985: 47–49 argues that the second part of *The Tales of Ben Sira* [Chronicles of Ben Sira] makes use of structural and thematic elements found in *Kalila and Dimna*. He sees the narrative frame of the dialogue between Ben Sira and Nebuchadnezzar as clearly influenced by the dialogue pattern of the eleventh chapter of *Kalila and Dimna* (between the king and the sage), a pattern predominant in Arabic fiction of the time.

28. The story in I Kings 10 has its parallel in II Chronicles 9. For the purposes of our discussion, there are no significant differences between the two versions. On the whole, Chronicles omits problematic elements from Solomon's biography—it pays comparatively little attention to his wisdom and centers on his role as the builder of the temple. It seems that Chronicles responds to some of the problems that Solomon's character raises in I Kings (and probably in other written and oral traditions). From our point of view, the different approaches support the claim that the Midrash on Proverbs in the riddling tale responds to a problematic thematic junction. On the different approaches of the two books, see Japhet 1977: 401–410.

29. On the Midrash as responding to the gaps of the biblical narrative, see Boyarin 1990: 39–59. I do not share Boyarin's view that the filling-in of gaps by the Midrash is always "legitimate"—that is, intact with the directions implied by biblical poetics. However, it seems to me that in the case of our biblical narrative, the Midrash does follow—in its response—the guidelines supplied by the poetics of the biblical text.

30. When God is revealed to him in a dream in Gibeon (I Kings 9), he asks for wisdom and his request is granted: "Lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee" (I Kings 3:12). Indeed, "all Israel . . . saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment" (I Kings 3:28), "And he spake three thousand proverbs . . . he spake of trees . . . he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes. And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom" (I Kings 4:32–34).

31. Josephus identifies the Queen of Sheba as the queen of Egypt. See Josephus 1934: 5:661. Indirectly, it associates the notion of marriage to the visit.

32. Scholem 1948: 165–175.

33. For Jewish traditions, see Ginzburg 1967–1969; for a wider discussion, see Pritchard 1974, which includes studies in the Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Ethiopian traditions. Recently, Jacob Lassner (1993) has discussed issues similar to those addressed here; unfortunately, at the time of writing, this book was not available to me.

34. Yassif 1982: 52 notes that the plot of the story in the *Targum Sheni* lacks inherent logic since no explanation is offered for Solomon's glass house trick. Yassif argues that the text underwent censorship, which cleared it of problematic elements such as the origins of the Queen of Sheba and the removing of the hair by Solomon.

35. See Thompson 1958.

36. See Yassif 1985: 54.

37. See Watt 1974: 96.

38. The conception of Solomon as the builder of the temple and also as the one who caused its destruction appears also in the midrashic story which tells of Solomon's marriage with Pharaoh's daughter on the night the building was completed. See note 40.

39. See Watson 1974: 115–119.

40. Thus in *Leviticus Rabbah* (12:5) we are told that when the building of the temple was completed he married the daughter of Pharaoh. The party that took place on the wedding night was riotous: the princess performed three hundred dances before Solomon, who was engaged in drinking wine for the first time in his life. The result of the wild celebration was that at four o'clock the following afternoon, Solomon was still asleep with the keys of the temple under him. Finally, his mother walked in, slapped him on his face, and reproved him: "Give not thy strength unto women [Prov. 31:3] . . . the generation of the Flood, because they were steeped in licentiousness, were blotted out of the world."

41. R. Simeon b. Yohai holds the view that Solomon "loved them literally, that is, he fornicated with them," whereas R. Yose goes as far as to say that the reason for Solomon's behavior is clear: "It was to draw them [the women] to the teachings of Torah and to bring them under the wings of Indwelling Presence of God" [Sanhedrin 2:6].

42. Solomon provokes Ashmedai and asks him in what way the demons are more powerful than human beings since Ashmedai, a demon, is chained by human beings. Ashmedai persuades Solomon to release him and to hand him his seal. Thus Ashmedai literally throws him off the throne and takes his place. Solomon is forced to beg from door to door until his persistent claim, that he is the true Solomon, bothers the members of the Sanhedrin. From the inquiry they hold, it turns out that Solomon's wives testify they had met with their husband but curiously his feet had been wrapped up. The sages immediately understand that Ashmedai had disguised himself as king, as it is a well-known fact that demons have strange feet—therefore Ashmedai had to conceal his (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin 68b).

43. Pickthall 1957. Elsewhere we find a story about a body that occupied Solomon's throne as punishment for his addiction to horses, on which he comments: "Lo! I have preferred the good things [of the world] to the remembrance of my Lord" [Surah 38, 33]. Another Arabic tradition presents its own version of Ashmedai's deception of Solomon. Solomon's fall from the throne is linked to a sin he had committed (in this version) by marrying the daughter of the king of Tyre, who entices him to worship her idols. Ashmedai's role is played this time by Arif the demon. Y. Meyuchas introduces this version in Meyuchas 1928: 28–30, among other legends collected from the Arab population of Palestine. See also *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, "Sulaiman b. Dawud."

44. See note 6.

45. See Aarne and Thompson 1961: no. 851, 851A.

46. For various Arabic traditions, see Chauvin 1901: 191–193. In Burton 1897: 12:65–81, the tale of "The Linguist-Dame, the Duenna and the King's Son" tells of a prince in exile who solves the princess's riddles. See also a Persian variant, Burton 1897: 8:272.

47. The Ethiopian tradition actualizes this option as Menelik is the son of the queen and Solomon.

48. In Proverbs, the foreign woman is opposed to wisdom, which is identified with morality, justice, and the awe of God. The foreign woman as a paradigmatic entity is personified in the singular figure of the Queen of Sheba. The Midrash on Proverbs presents two principal models of women. One is that of the active foreign woman who causes men to sin; she is called the promiscuous woman or the harlot and is manifestly a sexual threat. The opposite is the virtuous woman, whose active qualities are channeled to support her husband, the scholar. The legitimate activity of the woman is to serve the household.

49. See Noy 1963.

50. These oppositions are consequential to the logocentric concept. This (phallo-) logocentrism implies a view of the male as sovereign and as the establisher of cultural meanings while obscuring his position as the center to which the (binary) signs refer. The terms are used in French feminist literary criticism, influenced by Derrida and Lacan. For a survey, see Jones 1985: 80–112; Furman 1985: 59–79.

51. Taylor considers this riddle to be exceptional: most riddles whose topic is family ties create deliberate confusion that supposedly alludes to a breaking of a taboo, while the answer is innocent. See Taylor 1938; Noy 1963.

52. In some of the parallel sources (presented by Visotzky 1982), the phrase “My son” does not appear, due, perhaps, to censorship, for the reasons implied in my analysis.

53. In his series of articles on the Queen of Sheba Chastel claims that the riddles attributed to her are known as popular folk-riddles—identical or similar riddles may be found in folk collections (Chastel 1940: 33).

54. Taylor 1938: 26–27 notes that the riddle on Lot’s daughters has a longstanding popularity. He also mentions an eighth-century Syriac parallel.

55. See Graves 1960: 280–281, 285. Odysseus placed a bowl in front of the residents of the palace (Achilles’s hiding place) which contained a variety of presents. According to one version, Achilles, acting on his male instincts, drew out of the bowl a shield and a spear. Yet, this story is not presented as a riddle, Achilles looks like a woman, and even the distinction between men and women is conducted in a different manner to our narrative.

56. Balaam hears God’s voice, but because he is uncircumcised he cannot bear the sight, so he falls prostrate. There are different interpretative traditions to this verse. There are also traditions in which Adam, Abraham, and Job share Balaam’s perplexed reaction to the revelation (*Agadat Bereshit* 11).

57. Most of the important manuscripts read: “And if you [*atta*, i.e., masculine] do not wish.” In fact, only the first printed edition’s version has “come and learn [*bo’i limdi*, i.e., feminine].” Thus it makes the Queen of Sheba the addressee of the second homily, delivered by Solomon. However, even if the second homily is attributed to the “author” of the proem (see following note 58) or to the redactor, further connections are formed by this attribution—between Solomon as a homiletic interpreter and the “author” of the homily—thus blurring the boundaries between the riddling situation (in the riddling tale) and the interpretative situation.

58. On the proem as homily, see Heinemann 1971: 100–122.

59. On biblical verses as belonging to both systems, *langue* and *parole*, see Boyarin 1990: 29.

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III

ENIGMATIC MODES IN INDIA

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8

The Yakṣa's Questions

DAVID SHULMAN

Let us assume, for the moment, that the world is impenetrably enigmatic; that blindness is far more than a metaphor for human perception, the question being merely one of the degree of its actualization in each person; that any defined path, any conception of absolute values, any statement of identity—all inevitably and insidiously subvert themselves in real experience; and that language, at least in its referential mode, is consistently shown to abet this subversion. Assume, too, that life is a dice game, governed by rules known to be deceptive, in which the least experienced, least adequate player is nevertheless pushed to the point of staking everything he has, including, in the end, himself, with the certainty of losing. Assume a world in which each of the players in this game must be seen to die, in most cases violently and unfairly; in which, moreover, the poles of life and death are present in every move, with the death-pole always strangely privileged, cognitively and metaphysically, so that death is, in effect, the only possible outcome of the game. In such a world, one mostly fights for time.

Fighting for time, in such a world, is a way of fighting with or against time; and this is a large and constant part of Yudhiṣṭhira's struggle in the Sanskrit epic. This central figure among the five Pāṇḍava heroes pits himself again and again against the forces of *kāla* (Time or Death), which, the *Mahābhārata* is fond of telling us, is always "cooking" us (*kālaḥ pacati bhūtāni sarvāṇi*, 17.1.3). The struggle takes various forms. There is, first, Yudhiṣṭhira's protest against the outrage of unjust dying, as in the Abhimanyu episode (where the myth of the birth of Death is told to assuage the king's grief). This protest is, however, part of a more general stance in the world, which entails certain definite ethical assertions—Yudhiṣṭhira's characteristic mode of awareness. And the problem of meaning—What is the point of all the suffering?—lurks in the background, surfacing at critical moments of debate. This is a battle in which there are only occasional, always temporary, victories. The following pages explore one of the most conspicuous of these victories, which we might also see as an important discussion on the expressive forms and powers of language.

It comes at a major point of transition, at the very end of the third *parvan*, the Forest Book, when the Pāṇḍavas are completing the last days of their twelve-year exile in the wilderness. What lies immediately before them is the thirteenth year, to be spent in hiding and disguise, at the court of Virāṭa. In these final days in the forest, a crisis suddenly occurs. A deer, rubbing against a tree, catches in its antlers the fire-sticks that a Brahmin had placed on one of the branches. The deer runs off with these implements, and the Brahmin comes to Yudhiṣṭhira for help. The five brothers set off at once in pursuit of the deer, but it eludes them. Exhausted, depressed, and tortured by thirst and hunger, they take shelter beneath a large banyan tree, where the accumulated frustration of twelve years of suffering seems suddenly to prompt Nakula to ask, again, the unanswerable question: "Dharma never sinks low in our family. . . . We have no equal among living beings; why, then, are we in this strait?"

Yudhiṣṭhira responds first: "Disasters have neither limit [*maryādā*] nor cause; *dharma* distributes meaning to good and evil [*dharmas tu vibhajaty artham ubhayoh punya-pāpayoh*, 3.312.1]." This somewhat detached announcement is less than satisfying for the other brothers, who offer simpler explanations: Bhīma says it is all because he failed to kill the usher who dragged Draupadī into the Kuru court; Arjuna blames himself for not killing Karna, and Sahadeva regrets that he did not slay Śakuni. Yudhiṣṭhira then asks Nakula to climb the tree and search for signs of water. When Nakula reports that he sees trees and hears the screeching of water birds, Yudhiṣṭhira sends him to bring water from the pond that must be near.

The pond, indeed, exists; but as Nakula approaches, a disembodied voice calls to him: "Do not act rashly; I have a prior claim. You may drink only after answering my questions." He pays no heed to this voice, tastes the water, and falls down dead. When, because of the long delay, the remaining brothers are sent one by one by Yudhiṣṭhira, each suffers the same fate. At length Yudhiṣṭhira himself arrives to find the bodies of his brothers and a strange, one-eyed, fiery creature standing on a log beside the water. The creature identifies itself as a Yakṣa, and once more demands answers to its questions. Unlike his brothers, Yudhiṣṭhira accepts this demand.

The Yakṣa, we discover, is Dharma, Yudhiṣṭhira's father; and the questions he asks constitute a moment of testing for the *dharmic* hero. Before we examine these questions, let us note several features of the context. There is, for example, the prominence given to the question of evil, that comes into play immediately before the brothers confront the Yakṣa. Nakula's question is the perennial "why" of unmerited suffering, clearly a central issue in the epic; it may not be too much to assume that this question continues to inform the evolving verbal exchange. Then we may wonder whether the Brahmin's fire-sticks, the precipitating cause of the whole dramatic scene, carry any particular significance, or was it usual for Brahmins to hang them casually on trees in the forest? We should, perhaps, think of the role of the *araṇī*, the two sticks, one "male" and one "female," in producing through friction the fire that connects this world and heaven. Our episode is usually referred to in the texts as the *Āraṇeyaparvan*, the "section relating to the *araṇī*." The image seems too specific to allow us to speak only in general terms of a pervasive symbolism of sacrifice. There is also a strong sense of symbolic reversal at this crucial narrative juncture: the heroes are literally dying of thirst, but the water they find brings only death.

The world is out of joint: the good undergo the punishment of exile and sudden death, the expected source of life is poison. The only hope lies in words, in the answers Yudhiṣṭhira can formulate to the Yakṣa's queries. This preoccupation with language is also evident in the prelude to the trial, as when Yudhiṣṭhira speaks of the process of giving meaning to good and evil, or when he mourns his fallen brothers: "Human utterances may go wrong [*manuṣyasambhavā vāco vidharminyaḥ pratiśrutāḥ*], but what of the promises of the gods?" (313.6–7). (See also Nīlakaṇṭha ad 311.21.) Finally, we should allow ourselves to feel the dreamlike, surrealistic setting of this ordeal and to experience something of what Yudhiṣṭhira must feel when, parched by thirst, still in the shock of having discovered the corpses of his brothers, he finds himself interrogated by the one-eyed spirit of the water: "What makes the sun rise?"

The Language of Survival

As we turn to the questions, let us bear in mind that they are classed precisely as such, as *praśna*—not "riddles" in a strict sense (with two exceptions), but verbal puzzles of various kinds. The epic is fond of such *praśnas*: this is the term Draupadī uses when she tries to save herself and her husbands at the dice game, by asking if Yudhiṣṭhira was master of himself when he staked her. There, as elsewhere in the text, the *praśna* points to a baffling, ultimately insoluble crystallization of conflict articulated along opposing lines of interpretation (similarly with the major issue of the succession; the identification of the Pāṇḍavas at the end of the thirteenth year; and so on). But the major formative element in the Yakṣa's questions is, as a whole line of *Mahābhārata* interpretation culminating in the late-medieval commentator Nīlakaṇṭha has recognized, the Upaniṣadic speculative tradition.¹ Both questions and answers tend to the metaphysical, with the latent center of meaning—the ultimate reality that is the true object of the quest—usually present only as a suggested power situated somewhere between the two explicit poles of the contest. Only the first question manages to elicit a straightforward reference to this center:

45. What makes the sun rise? What things move around it? What makes it set? In what is it fixed?
46. Brahman makes the sun rise. The gods move around it. Dharma makes it set. It is fixed in Truth.

So one begins with Brahman, the ultimate; in a sense, the answer to all the subsequent questions is set out in advance. Still, the game/trial is far from over; what remains is the cunning and potentially deadly linguistic duel in which Yudhiṣṭhira will fight for his brothers, and for his own life, by formulating answers on a level somewhere below, or within, the ultimacy that he posits in his first reply. All his answers should probably be seen as subsumed by this starting point, and this may lead us to wonder just how seriously, or how literally, to take Yudhiṣṭhira's statements. For now, let us simply note the interesting assertion that Dharma produces the sunset—the daily moment of reabsorption—and also the concluding affirmation of the sun's fixation (*pratiṣṭhā*) in Truth.

Each satisfactory answer leads to another question or series of questions. Wisdom, or survival, then appear to lie, at least at this stage, in the ability to produce an answer, properly couched in metrical form, to each individual query. Silence on Yudhiṣṭhira's part would be fatal. Everything depends on movement, the offering up of a linguistic countermove (*prativākya*) to block the Yakṣa's primary move, with its everpresent hint of possible destruction. In a contest of this sort, the actual content of the answer may matter less than the simple existence of the verbal response; or the explicit content may stand in a skewed or oblique relation to a more fundamental perception, perhaps resistant to verbal formulation. Nonetheless, the level of explicit utterance does matter: clearly, not just any answer will do, and there is a certain integrity and coherence about Yudhiṣṭhira's replies. Knowledge, *jñāna*, is being tried, through verbal means. We can, then, hardly avoid an attempt to come to terms with the content of the utterances on the level at which they appear. Thus, as we read through the passage, a rough typology begins to emerge.

First, we notice the general framework of categorical questioning, with strong cosmological reference (including social cosmology). Having begun with the sun and its daily course, the Yakṣa quickly moves into questions relating to the placement of Brahmins and Kṣatriyas with reference to the categories "human" and "divine:"

49. What is the divinity [*devatva*] of the Brahmins, what is [their] dharma, like that of the good [*satām iva*]? What makes them human [*mānuṣo bhavaḥ*], and what do they share with those who are not good [*asatām*]?
 50. Vedic study is their divinity; they share penance [*tapas*] with the good; death makes them human; they have blame in common with those who are not good.

The Yakṣa repeats question 49 in connection with the Kṣatriyas, and Yudhiṣṭhira replies:

52. The bow is their [the Kṣatriyas'] divinity; they share sacrifice with the good; fear makes them human; they have desertion in common with those who are not good.

So both Brahmins and Kṣatriyas belong, in some sense, in both worlds; they are both human and divine; as human beings, they have powers of transcendence—Vedic study (and *tapas*) for the Brahmin, the bow and sacrifice for the Kṣatriya. Yudhiṣṭhira is a Kṣatriya: apparently, he knows that his path to divinity leads through sacrifice and/or war. This answer thus bears a rather special burden. Once sacrifice has emerged in its traditional role as providing cosmic linkage, the Yakṣa seeks to explore it further:

53. What is the one sacrificial chant [*sāman*]? What is the one sacrificial formula [*yajus*]? What among these veils [or envelops, *vr̥nute*] the sacrifice, and what does the sacrifice never exceed?
 54. Breath is the one sacrificial chant; mind is the one sacrificial formula; the Vedic verse [*ṛk*; v.l. *vāk* = "Speech," BORI text] veils the sacrifice, and the sacrifice never exceeds it.

We feel at once the presence of the Upaniṣadic speculative model of esoteric identifications, with the common tendency to translate elements from the ritual into internal equivalents (breath, mind, and, with special force here, language, seen as subsuming and also “veiling” the sacrifice). This *praśna* is perfectly suited to the tone of many Upaniṣadic discussions; we might also want to consider the possibility that for some, at least, of Yudhiṣṭhira's answers, what we are hearing is the reproduction by the “riddlee” of a fixed and memorized text. In any case, by now it appears that Yudhiṣṭhira's conversation with the Yakṣa fulfills all three of the major conditions for what might be called, abstracting and generalizing to some extent, the classical Upaniṣadic “riddling” scenario: (1) the situation of the contest on the border between life and death, so that wrong answers (and also other wrong moves, such as excessive questioning) may prove fatal; (2) the presence, within the contest, of a concealed ultimacy, often perceived in terms of the individual's underlying identity (the related problem then being one of somehow capturing and stabilizing this identity in language); and (3) a fascination with cognitive mapping—the delineation and separation of categories and cosmological levels, and the simultaneous articulation of links and possible identifications between them—this being the basic form that the whole process of questioning and answering assumes.² It is within this inherited programmatic scheme that the warrior-riddlee of the epic is forced to speak.

Given the primary focus on the categorical definition of levels or domains and on the possibility of movement between them, it becomes easier to understand why this peculiar catechism plays repeatedly with the boundaries between “human/non-human” and “living/dead”:

57. Who experiences the objects of the senses, has understanding, is honored in the world, respected by all beings, goes on breathing—but is not alive?
58. He who offers nothing to the five—deities, guests, dependents, ancestors, and the Self—though he breathes, is not alive. [See also 83–84].
61. What does not close its eyes when asleep? What does not move when born? What has no heart? What increases by running away [*vega*]?
62. A fish does not close its eyes in sleep; an egg, when born, does not move; a stone has no heart; a river increases by running away.

The latter example follows the “dehumanizing” or “dis-animating” direction of many riddles: the question suggests a series of paradoxical human images which the answer transfers to another, alien register (heartless stones and profligate rivers).³ This *praśna* must have been part of a fixed repertoire, since it (alone among the questions of this section) recurs in the story of Aṣṭāvakra's riddling session (3.133.28–29; see below). It, together with the *praśna* that precedes it in verses 59–60, may be said to constitute the only true riddle-like examples in this passage.

59. What is heavier than the earth? What is taller than the sky? What is faster than the wind? What is more numerous than grass [v.l. *nṛṇām*, than men]?
60. The mother is heavier than the earth; the father is taller than the sky; the mind is faster than the wind; worries are more numerous than grass.

This time the movement is *toward* the animate and the human; but even here, in an atmosphere of riddles with singular, cleverly encoded (and evidently familiar) answers, the cosmological coloring of the interchange is retained.

From “riddles” of this type, it is a short step to the “monk’s riddles” with their rote answers, in this case with a moral or ethical culmination:⁴

63. What is the friend of the traveler, the friend of the one at home, the friend of the sick, the friend of the dying?
64. A caravan is the traveler’s friend; a wife is the friend of the man at home; a doctor is the sick man’s friend; charity is the friend of the dying.

Once the moral direction has opened up, there is no stopping it; from this point, in addition to what might be called “identification puzzles” (“What is the self of a man? Who is the friend made by fate (*daiva*)?”—Answers: a son; a wife . . . 71–72), which also may reach toward an ethical finale (as in this same set, 71–72), most of the *prāśnas* elicit reponses on the level of values and moral conduct (see 70, 74, 76, 78). Clearly the most central, most meaningful set is 75–76:

75. What is the highest dharma in this world? What dharma always bears fruit? What must one restrain to be free from sorrow? Which bond is never worn away?
76. The highest dharma is noninjury (*ānṛśamsya*); the Vedic dharma always bears fruit; if one restrains the mind, he is free from sorrow; the bond with good people is never worn away.

Yudhiṣṭhira is summing up his life’s wisdom; he will repeat the essential first part of this response later, when the purely verbal part of the trial is over. The Yakṣa, satisfied with Yudhiṣṭhira’s answers (we will observe this transition more closely in a moment) offers to revive *one* of his fallen brothers. Faced with this excruciating, seemingly impossible choice, Yudhiṣṭhira does not hesitate; he asks that Nakula be revived. When the Yakṣa wonders at this—Why not Arjuna or Bhīma, born from the same mother as Yudhiṣṭhira?—the latter explains that this is the very logic of his decision: his father had two wives, whom he, Yudhiṣṭhira, regards as equal; let each of them have at least one surviving son. And, in further explanation: “*Ānṛśamsya* is the highest dharma, which I regard more highly than the highest truth; *ānṛśamsya* is what I seek to do Everyone knows that my character is dharma.” (313.29). What could be more persuasive than this confession of faith? The Yakṣa responds by reviving all the dead brothers.

We know the further results of this move: the Yakṣa reveals himself to Yudhiṣṭhira as his heavenly father—actually his “real” father, so to speak—i.e., Dharma, whom Yudhiṣṭhira has never known.⁵ He also offers his son three boons, and Yudhiṣṭhira chooses: first, that the Brahmin’s fire-kit be restored to him (despite everything that has intervened, this initial difficulty is not forgotten, the debt still not discharged); second, that the Pāṇḍavas pass the crucial thirteenth year of exile safely, in disguise, unrecognized by anyone; and finally, that he conquer greed, delusion, and anger, and that his mind be always fixed on charity, penance, and truth. The final boon is, as Dharma immediately states, tautological or tautidental: Yudhiṣṭhira’s character

is in any case exactly as he asks that it be. Note the way this cruel trial evolves into a final statement of identity, after the disclosure and meeting of father and son.⁶

But let us return to the moment of transition, and to the subtle play with language that produces it. What is the actual mechanism of reversal? Something is happening here, in the unfolding verbal contest, that should make us a little uneasy. I assume, again, as a working hypothesis, that the content of the exchange is not entirely random, and that the role of linguistic articulation is actually seen by the text as endowed with serious, effective power. Listen to the answer Yudhiṣṭhira gives, after the final sequence of questions, when the Yakṣa asks him to define a man (*puruṣa*):

divaṃ sprśati bhūmim ca śabdaḥ punyena karmaṇā/ yāvat sa śabdo bhavati tāvat puruṣa ucyate// (120)

The word [or sound] touches heaven and earth together with [in association with, through] a good deed; as long as that word exists, one may be called a man.

Language is linked to deed, and the two together form a reputation (thus van Buitenen, translating the above: “The repute of a good deed touches heaven and earth; one is called a man as long as his repute lasts.”)⁷ But the formulation is also suggestive. One might almost paraphrase the verse, in line with the cosmological and categorical concerns that we have seen to inform the entire question scenario, as stating that a human being is someone who, through language, connects disjointed domains. If we follow the consequent analogy with the *araṇī* fire-sticks, language might also be thought to have a fiery and partly destructive aspect in this work of establishing connections.⁸

But how does it work? And do the suggested linkages inhabit the verbal space we think they do? A pandit's reading of the Yakṣapraśna section would, I think, take things optimistically on the level of their assertion: Yudhiṣṭhira passes the test with flying colors; his ideal of *ānṛsaṃsya* is the perfect answer to the question he is asked; death is thus reversible, and things will turn right in the end. Real knowledge exists, is available through exemplary figures (who speak the truth), and always contrasts in ultimate terms with illusory experience, including that of mundane loss and suffering.⁹ Another possibility, not too far removed from the former, is to follow Nīlakaṇṭha's method, thus spiritualizing and consequently allegorizing the entire dialogue—an *ādhyātmika* reading of *Māhābhārata*. I do not wish to deny the possible validity of either of such readings, but it does seem to me that the text itself suggests another possible approach, in which an implicit archaeology of linguistic utterance plays a major part. If we listen well, both questions and answers begin to echo significantly within the wider narrative and experiential context of the epic; and it is these echoes, rather than the surface verbal expressions with which we are presented, that really matter most.

Take *ānṛsaṃsya* itself—“noninjury,” hence “kindness” or “compassion” (“uncruelty” in van Buitenen's translation), Yudhiṣṭhira's proclaimed ideal. There is no doubt that this is a moving and “true” formulation of dharmic value, and one cannot but identify with the hero who insists so unequivocally upon it. Absolute unequivocation, in this case, embodies a believable truth which no event, it seems, can vitiate. There is surely a level at which this statement of Yudhiṣṭhira's is the only right answer, sanctioned by the text. But let us excavate something of the word's surroundings, to

expose its embeddedness in context. For one thing, we may note that the declaration of “noninjury” as highest value comes only about halfway through the ordeal of questions. If the point of the ordeal was primarily to elicit this answer, and to stress it as the proper conclusion, then the remaining questions would be rather superfluous. Something apparently remains unsaid. More to the point, Yudhiṣṭhira, whatever he may believe to be the proper way, is a prime actor in a violent disaster on a universal scale—as, indeed, he himself repeatedly tells us, especially when it is too late to reverse the consequences of his decisions. He fights, kills, makes demands, including the possessive claims inherent to kingship, and colludes, however reluctantly, in the general progression toward devastation. The dissonance between his values and his actions is not merely cognitive but truly existential, and the result can only be an accretion of irony to his proclamation in favor of noninjury. The warrior committed to such an ideal is surely, in some sense, an ironic figure. This contextual irony, moreover, deepens dramatically at the end of the epic, in the passage that, as I will argue later, is the narrative twin to the Yakṣapraśna section. When Yudhiṣṭhira, still pregnantly described as *ānṛśaṃsya-samāyukta* (endowed with noninjury/compassion, 17.3.32), arrives in heaven, he sees only his Kaurava enemies there; his brothers and Draupadī are suffering torments in hell. Such are the fruits of his *ānṛśaṃsya*; or, more precisely, what Yudhiṣṭhira perceives, in a flash of insight, is the shocking lack of correlation between his moral stance and the structure of the world. *Daiva* “fate” has produced this result (18.2.42), which leaves a glaring gap in consciousness. Yudhiṣṭhira’s response, which will clear away this final trial, is to curse dharma and the gods.

I will have more to say about this curse. For now, we might simply note Nīlakaṇṭha’s gloss of *ānṛśaṃsya*, in its second appearance in the Yakṣapraśna, as *avaiṣāmya* (ad 3.313.29). The suggestion is appropriate; we know the term *vaiṣāmya*, literally “unevenness,” from the Nala story, where it functions as a kind of key to the hero’s perception of his disastrous inner development.¹⁰ *Avaiṣāmya* is the opposite, a non-unevenness, thus an abstraction of symmetry and balanced order. There is excellent reason to believe that this notion is well suited to Yudhiṣṭhira’s particular craving. He hungers after a world of balance and evenness, without remnants, where goodness is met with goodness and where words perhaps lead to truth. Kṛṣṇa, too, speaks of such a world when he tells Utaṅka (hypocritically) that he tried his best to create “evenness” (*sauṣāmya*) between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas (14.53–55). But we know that Kṛṣṇa is lying; the god works in a world that the *Mahābhārata* constantly discloses to us as basically and essentially *viṣāma*, uneven, inherently off balance, always spiraling downward toward destruction. Kṛṣṇa himself consistently feeds this imbalance, fosters disorder, undermines surface symmetries.

So the overtones of *ānṛśaṃsya*, in Yudhiṣṭhira’s statements, seem not a little disharmonious, if we listen well. While we need not exaggerate or take too literally the suggestive power of their situation within the narrative, these are not simple statements. The truth-level of their utterance exists in a framework of potential disjunction. Indeed, the dissection of language levels now begins to seem part of the overall thrust of this section. To put the matter differently, we might imagine that the trial that begins with a statement of ultimacy—“Brahman makes the sun rise”—entails a process of entropic unwinding, in which gaps open up in language,

in the relation of language and intentionality, and in the relation between language and the world. Perhaps the process should be seen as a downward spiral concluding with the identity statement—Dharma to Yudhiṣṭhira/Dharmarāja: “You are who you are”—which reproduces the initial ultimate identification. But, however we picture it, the play with language in this conversation on the edge of life and death has a certain unexpected twist built into it. The twist produces its own peculiar expressivity. Let me conclude this part of the essay by looking at one more example: the verses that (at least in Southern Recension and the BORI text) apparently induce the Yakṣa to put an end to the trial and to grant Yudhiṣṭhira his boons.

It is striking that these verses take us back to the theme of death. The Yakṣa asks:

83. How can a man be dead? How can a kingdom be dead? How can a *śrāddha* ceremony be dead? How can a sacrifice be dead?

Yudhisthira's replies follow a predictable, fairly obvious logic:

84. A poor man is dead; a kingdom without a king is dead; a *śrāddha* ceremony without a learned Brahmin is dead; a sacrifice is dead without a gift [*dakṣiṇā*] to the priests.

The Yakṣa continues in the mode of the identification questions, though we note that he returns to the theme of the *śrāddha*:

85. What is a (proper) direction [*dik*]? What is water? What is food, and what poison? Tell me the time [or death, *kāla*] for a *śrāddha*—and then you may drink and take away.

Food, drink, poison, a cardinal direction—the language is overloading the verse, simultaneously crowding and fragmenting it; for the first time, the final *pada* offers hope of release. Yudhiṣṭhira also exceeds his prior model for reply:

86. Good people are a direction; space [*ākāśa*] is water; the cow is food; a request is poison; a Brahmin is the time for a *śrāddha*—or what do you think, Yakṣa?

Again, a mixture of moral and cosmic-symbolic identifications, and it works—the questions cease. Perhaps it is the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira, at last, turns the question back on his interrogator, that he asks a question himself, that effects the reversal. Or perhaps the series has culminated in some way that deserves probing, although the Vulgate continues with several further questions before reaching its own interesting closure, as we will see. The final query of the verses cited points to the *śrāddha* ceremony for the dead ancestors, while the penultimate verse of *praśnas* builds toward the paradoxical image of a “dead” *śrāddha*. Yudhiṣṭhira's answers are reasonable and acceptable, as far as they go. But if we read these replies in the light of the story in which they are embedded, they take on an uncanny proleptic quality. On the one hand, they deny “real” death in favor of metaphoric transpositions: a man is dead when he is impoverished, for example. This, one might almost say, is

Yudhiṣṭhira's own problem, which is played out in the conclusion: alone among his brothers, and almost alone in the epic generally, Yudhiṣṭhira is unable, both physically and psychologically (also, perhaps, metaphysically), to die.¹¹ His final loneliness, the natural correlate of his intellectual and moral stance, speaks eloquently of his predicament. But on the other hand, each of the metaphors he marshals has its own suggestive power. Yudhiṣṭhira will experience the death of poverty, or of loss, in extreme form—when he is left to rule an empty world. His kingdom, and the other kingdoms of the earth, will, in effect, die the death of kinglessness. And what *śrāddha* could be more dead than one which has no survivors to perform it?

The metaphors extend the bounds of narrative eventuality, but only slightly. The Pāṇḍava kingdom will, just barely, have a king; the Pāṇḍavas will perform the exhaustive *śrāddha* of Book XIII. The point is the specific aptness of the imagery and Yudhiṣṭhira's innocence of what he says. The war will issue into the threnodies, the rites and visions of mourning, just as the trial-by-question issues into riddles of *śrāddha* and death. Such is the closure that this text provides. Yudhiṣṭhira's world is already coming to an end. But he does not know this, and he will never accept it. His statements, unintentionally proleptic, embody a truth that is still as hidden from him as is his divine identity. In this sense, and because we know the story, we can hear beyond the overt level of his speech. We hear the echoes from other strata which complete, without abrogating, the force of his language. *Daiva* resonates in his words.

Toward Understanding Yudhiṣṭhira's Curse

Even if we prefer to take Yudhiṣṭhira's answers, including the final sequence just discussed, at face value—without putting undue stress on the associations they arouse, or their relations to elements outside the immediate context—we will still have to deal with the narrative parallelism between the Yakṣapraśna section and Yudhiṣṭhira's final trial in hell. Moreover, even a minimalist approach to the dialogue with the Yakṣa will reveal a certain typological stratification within the exchange. Before turning to Yudhiṣṭhira's later experiences, let me try to formalize the above discussion by positing the presence of at least three levels in the language of *praśna* and response.

The first is overt, discursive, and definite. I call this the *vārttā* level, following the Vulgate which brings this term to the fore in *its* conclusion to the ordeal:

114. Who is happy? What is amazing? What is the path, and what the simple truth [*vārttikā*]? Answer these four questions, and your dead kinsmen will live.
115. That man who cooks vegetables in his own home, on the fifth or sixth day, who has no debts and is not an exile—he is truly happy.
116. Day by day, living creatures go to Yama's world, while the rest [*śeṣaḥ*] keep looking for something stable. What could be more amazing than this?
117. Reasoning [*tarka*] is without foundation; the sacred texts are at odds with one another; there is not even a single sage whose opinion could be considered authoritative. The truth about dharma is hidden in a cave. The way the great have gone—that is the path.¹²

The latter verse, which is well known in the Sanskrit tradition, leads Yudhiṣṭhira to a final, extended metaphor:

118. In this cauldron fashioned from delusion, with the sun as fire and day and night as kindling wood, the months and seasons as the ladle for stirring, Time [or Death, *kāla*] cooks all beings: this is the simple truth [*vārtā*].

The Yakṣa concurs: "You have answered my questions in accordance with reality (*yathātathyam*).” Now comes the definition of man through language, followed by the further test as to which of the brothers will be revived.

Vārtā is "information," "news." Yudhiṣṭhira's exposition is, surely, realistic, and wholly appropriate to the epic world. Logic is no use, even the Veda and the sages offer mutually contradictory opinions (thus Nīlakaṇṭha ad 117); the truth of dharma is hidden and enigmatic, perhaps ultimately beyond recovery; the world's creatures die before our eyes day after day, and we still pursue flimsy illusions of security. Time cooks us minute by minute. Even the metaphor serves essentially to give graphic force to this direct and informative description. It is interesting that, for the Vulgate text, this stark statement caps the series of *praśnas* and leads to the reversal, as if the Yakṣa were simply waiting for a direct and lucid formulation of an obvious truth, taken rather literally. But other answers proffered by Yudhiṣṭhira in the course of the ordeal are equally capable of being understood on this same, unambiguous level.

A second level articulates programmatic conclusions, often of a moral type, though perhaps sustained by symbolic equations and statements of identity, in terms that also appear—but only appear—to be unambiguous. I will call this the level of *dharma*, understood as Yudhiṣṭhira wants to understand it. His formulation of *ānṛsaṃsya* as supreme value is a prime example. In light of the discussion in the previous section, let me say merely that this level, which is surely the most conspicuous and has generally been identified with the positive purport of the whole passage, need not be taken entirely literally. The surface can be deceptive, and is in any case not the whole story. Potential ironies abound.

The third level, which I refer to as that of *daiva* because of its links with wider thematic issues in the *Mahābhārata*, is always implicit and context-dependent, although the context need not be the immediate setting of the trial. Rather, this level establishes relations between our episode and other similar or otherwise associated ones from the larger epic frame. Here the text, as it were, allows its protagonists to play out their viewpoints to their logical conclusions.¹³ This contextualizing often has strong implications for our understanding of Yudhiṣṭhira's statements, seen not simply through his consciousness but through that of the epic's narrator-poets. Here neither the referential content of the answers nor their cumulative force as a single, relatively cohesive set can exhaust for us their expressive power.

I am not, however, suggesting that this stratification represents a simple hierarchy, or that the *daiva* level, as I read it, is more "true." The point is rather the potential opening up of multiple viewpoints, perhaps expressed through the same linguistic utterances, and coexisting by means of an internal dynamic that probably reflects a latent theory of knowledge in relation to language.

To illustrate something of how this works, I want to follow through the structural parallel already noted. As we have seen, the Yakṣa section concludes a critical stage in the unfolding of the epic story—the end of the forest exile (arguably the most creative and fluid period in terms of the heroes' exploration of their situation, their world). Our passage is thus the bridge to the year of disguise and, following this, to the coming war. More than a technical lapse of time comes to an end with Yudhiṣṭhira's successful answers to his father's puzzles. But the test recurs, again at a moment of closure, in the final chapters of the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, the text recognizes this parallelism and continuity: Dharma himself mentions the ordeal with the Yakṣa as the first of three trials to which he has put his son—the second and third both emerging out of the *svargārohaṇa*, the final ascent to heaven (18.3.33; see also 17.3.19–20). It is almost as if, within the internal perspective of the text, Yudhiṣṭhira's ordeal were being replayed in the light of the further experience and knowledge he has acquired. How will his answers fare this time? Can he still believe them? Repetition, as A. K. Ramanujan has eloquently shown, is one of the keys this text offers us to perceiving its unity and range of meanings.¹⁴ Let me quickly summarize the narrative events relevant to this particular instance of such replication.

The five brothers and Draupadī have started out, by foot, for heaven, now that Kṛṣṇa is dead and the dreadful Kali Age—our present era—begun. On the way, one by one, Draupadī and the brothers fall and die, with the exception of the lonely Yudhiṣṭhira (who also explains at each death the one flaw in character that made this final loss inevitable). An unclean dog—Dharma in disguise—follows the surviving hero to the gates of heaven; Yudhiṣṭhira, insisting again on his ideal of *ānṛṣaṃsya*, refuses to enter unless this faithful (*bhakta*) creature be allowed in with him. This is the second trial, also successful; Dharma reveals himself and praises his son. Once inside heaven, as we have seen, Yudhiṣṭhira is shocked by the presence of his former enemies and the absence of his brothers. The gods send him with a messenger (*dūta*)—again, Dharma in disguise—to hell, where, in the midst of the most appalling visions, he discovers his dead brothers and his wife. They beg him to stay, even if only for a moment more. This is too much for Yudhiṣṭhira; angrily, he contemplates (*vimamṛṣe*) what has happened, this terrible deformation (*vikāra*), the disaster produced by *daiva* (*daivakāritam*). Overwhelmed by grief, anxiety, and anger, he curses the gods and dharma and sends the messenger back to heaven to announce that he, Yudhiṣṭhira, will stay in hell with his brothers. At this, the hellish vision dissipates: it was all a trick (*māyā*) of Indra's, and another test by Dharma. This perception is the prelude to the brothers' final loss of their human condition (*mānuṣo bhāvah*, 18.3.34) and to the reabsorption of *all* the heroes, including the Kaurava antiheroes, into the divinities from which they had originally emerged into the world.

I cannot discuss here the ontology of this episode—in other words, the status and meaning of the illusion or trial and its replacement by another reality. What matters to us is the fact that Yudhiṣṭhira finds himself back in the same, familiar situation, where he must struggle again for the lives of his fallen brothers, in a context of seemingly incomprehensible injustice, against the same disguised father-opponent, with the same questionable linguistic means. We have already observed

the difficulty that emerges in his consciousness with respect to his chosen ideal of *ānṛśaṃsya*. Indeed, he is shown, for once, as totally confused and distressed: "Am I asleep or awake? I am in pain, my mind disoriented." And for excellent reason: the old conceptual plan, already badly battered by the world, has now entirely collapsed. It is noteworthy that this time he makes no attempt to reclaim the lost vision. A change occurs, he thinks hard, and is at last led, as if trapped in a blind alley, to the curse—a curse which must also, since he is Dharmarāja, include himself.

How are we to understand this move, which, after all, does achieve a result similar to the successful conclusion of the Yakṣa ordeal? I have no easy solution to the question. Let me, however, suggest a few possibilities. I have heard a fine Sanskrit pandit explain the curse as a form of calculated innocence: far from having his convictions undermined by the experience of hell, Yudhiṣṭhira holds firmly to them; the curse is only a clever manipulative gesture, a way of *forcing* dharma, or Dharma, to give in. That, one might say, is why it works so well. Dharma simply cannot survive this frontal attack by its one incarnation and spokesman.¹⁵ Closely related to this view is one that makes Yudhiṣṭhira the uncompromising vehicle of existential protest: he cannot and will not accept the way of the world, the darker sides of dharma. In this he is consistent from the very beginning, and the end only confirms his position, which is also an effective one in terms of reversing the unacceptable reality he sees (including the existence of death). The reversal apart, this image has a Greek tragic coloring to it. In any case, it is surely fair to say that Yudhiṣṭhira is throughout a tormented and embattled figure. Extending this line of interpretation, one might see the curse as still more extreme, as a rejection, at the end of the day, of the whole world of dharma with its contradictions and cruelties, its "subtle" meaning now exposed as little more than a veil for unbearable suffering. In other words, to put the matter starkly: the somewhat theoretical answers offered to the Yakṣa, when played out to the end in the context of human living and dying, turn out to be surprisingly inadequate; to reject them is to transcend the condition of which they are part.

But in what sense could an ideal of noninjury and compassion be inadequate? It seems absurd to think of *ānṛśaṃsya* as somehow "wrong." At most, we might feel that there is a dimension missing, unarticulated by Yudhiṣṭhira's explicit formulations. Were this the case, the final reversal could also make sense. For the curse works: the blatant injustice evident in the reality of the test gives way to a process of reabsorption—that is, to the transition from human to divine. The path to this goal—the ultimate, if unconscious goal of the Pāṇḍava heroes all along, as we know from the myth of the five Indras in Book I—leads via testing and disguise to a moment of contemplation and insight. Yudhiṣṭhira seems to experience a switch in consciousness. As we might expect, given the axiology of this text, the epistemic change immediately entails an existential one. To reject the world of dharma would thus not necessarily negate dharma itself. The level of linguistically motivated conceptualization may give way to a wider experience, rich with *daiva* content. Translated into language, this enriched understanding takes the form of a curse which is, perhaps, itself the answer, a fulfillment of the *daivic* process of violent reabsorption. But it is truly a case of translation—no less than in the case of the *praśnas* and their answers. The curse, too, has features of obliquity and partiality. Its advantage lies in coinciding with negation: unlike the conventional processual movement of the riddle, from paradoxical

superimposition of levels to their lucid separation, Yudhiṣṭhira's curse moves through the irreparable rupture of the surface toward a final fusion of the disjointed. The hero's last linguistic act—he speaks no more after addressing the messenger in this vein—conjoins dharma and its negation, transforming human to divine. Where the Yakṣa's categorical puzzles, properly answered, led only to more disjunction, and to a temporary reprieve from the terror of time, the curse completes, by way of this negation, the necessary cycle of violent reintegration. Language becomes sacrifice; Dharmarāja becomes dharma, at last; the world destroyed becomes a non-world that is immortal and restored.

Postscript: Crooked Wisdom

Such a view suggests a particular structuring of language in relation to what is seen as real. For one thing, language that connects with ultimacy cannot operate in the same way as language that answers questions. One looks for the negative movement, away from separation and demarcation, toward paradox and fusion. Still, truth also has its place within language. "Language veils the sacrifice, which never exceeds it," as Yudhiṣṭhira informs the Yakṣa. There seems to be a way to use language not only to express truth, but also to make it work upon the person and/or the world.

We might think of the Tree of Truth as the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* describes it: what is apparent, the trunk and branches, is *satya*, truth, but its roots are embedded in *anṛta*, untruth. Therefore one should speak truth, so as not to dry up the source.¹⁶ If we take this image seriously, then truth, in its concrete and externalized linguistic embodiments, is a phenomenon of the surface, whereas "reality" is a matter of wholeness. Language probably encompasses both domains, and allows for linkage between them.

But the linkage is indirect, implicit, "crooked." The third book of the epic, the same book that concludes with the Yakṣapraśna, tells us of another riddling contest, in some ways highly reminiscent of Yudhiṣṭhira's trial:

Aṣṭāvakra—"Eight-times Crooked"—was the son of Kahoḍa, a student of the famous master Uddālaka. The latter gave his pupil both all his learning and his daughter, and she became pregnant with a fiery child. One night during the pregnancy, this embryo spoke from out of the womb to his father: "You have been studying all night, but you're not yet even close to getting it right!" Ashamed before his pupils, the father cursed the child to be crooked in eight ways. But even before the boy was born, Kahoḍa went to the court of King Janaka to try to win wealth in a riddling contest with Bandin, the great riddler [*vādaavid*]; Kahoḍa lost and was drowned by his opponent in the sea.

Aṣṭāvakra grew up thinking that Uddālaka was his father, until one day, when he was twelve years old, he discovered the truth from Uddālaka's son, Śvetaketu. Together with Śvetaketu, Aṣṭāvakra went to challenge Bandin. The gatekeeper at Janaka's palace tried to prevent the young boy from entering, but Aṣṭāvakra successfully answered three riddles of the king's [including the one that recurs in the Yakṣapraśna] and was allowed to confront Bandin. The contest took the form of a continuing series of number statements. Bandin: "There is one fire, kindled in many places; one sun that illuminates this world; one heroic king of the

gods; one lord of the ancestors, Yama." Aṣṭāvakra: "Two friends, Indra and Agni, go together; there are two divine sages, Nārada and Parvata; there are two Aśvins, two wheels to a cart; the pair, husband and wife, were ordained by the Creator." Each such verse [*vākya*] was answered by a counterverse [*uttara*] until Bandin became stuck in the middle of the series relating to the number 13. When Bandin fell silent, Aṣṭāvakra completed the verse.

As the victor, Aṣṭāvakra demanded that Bandin be drowned in the sea, like all Bandin's former victims. Bandin disclosed that he was the son of Varuṇa, god of the sea, and that a twelve-year sacrifice had been going on under the ocean, parallel to Janaka's rite; for this reason, Bandin had sent so many learned Brahmins to their watery deaths. They would now return, while he, Bandin, would rejoin his father in the sea. Thus Kahoḍa emerged from the ocean to greet his son, while Bandin took leave of Janaka and drowned himself. (3.132.134).

As in the Yakṣa section, fathers and sons meet through the verbal contest (*vivāda*). But the story of Bandin is one of perfect symmetries; each of the contestants regains his father, again by crossing cosmic domains; and the verbal contest at Janaka's court, in *this* world, turns out to be the mirror-image of a submarine rite, with its own necessary riddlers. To be drowned by failing to answer Bandin's questions was thus, in fact, to be transposed to another (hidden) contest; both rites achieve conclusion, an end to the riddles, only when the "crooked" twelve-year-old boy completes the thirteenth verse. By doing so, he propels the earthly ritual to superior status, as the defeated riddlers returning from the sea announce: Kahoḍa reveals that the gods have honored Janaka's rite above others. Aṣṭāvakra has rescued (or "raised up") Speech (*vācam athojjahāra*, his boast to Janaka after the contest); Janaka recognizes his language as divine (*śṛṇomi vācam tava divyārūpam amānuṣīm*) and declares the child, too, to be superhuman (*divyarūpo 'si sākṣāt*). Note the close parallel to Yudhiṣṭhira's achievement through answering the Yakṣa's questions. Here, too, the exchange clearly has a metaphysical tenor (*brahmādvaita*, "non-duality with the Absolute" is the name Aṣṭāvakra offers for the riddling). The dialogue built around counting also suggests a certain symmetry, as if the two parties were standing on opposite sides of a chasm, the inaccessible locus of reality, toward which they were reaching out with their metrically and verbally perfected numbers; one draws life up from the chasm, the other ends by falling in. As in the dice game, counting offers a mechanism for articulating esoteric connections in the cosmos. But it is no accident that the loser breaks down in the middle of the thirteenth verse or that Aṣṭāvakra wins by completing this verse; thirteen is a number for the whole, especially the whole seen in relation to time (the twelve months); it is, moreover, a whole that both contains and exceeds its parts, just as the language of such a contest is more than the propositions that seem to comprise it. Speech offers its master a way to encompass the real—to conclude the set of thirteen, thus attaining totality. But the master of speech is a child, born with wisdom achieved in the womb¹⁷ and an exterior that, by his father's curse, is wholly crooked.

This is one model of the riddler, whose crookedness is correlated to a wholeness that exceeds verbal truth. Yudhiṣṭhira's case is somewhat different. When the Yakṣa asks, Yudhiṣṭhira responds truthfully, but the truth is not nearly enough. One has to go through the riddle, through its verbal embodiments, to reach a different, more encompassing goal. Unlike Oedipus, unlike Herakles, whose optimistic answers to

their riddles are based on fundamental misreadings, Yudhiṣṭhira speaks the truth: the dharmic knot *is* resolved, but at the same time dharma continues to unravel into disaster. Even Yudhiṣṭhira's words—*especially* Yudhiṣṭhira's words, with their confident identifications and lucid demarcations of values and domains—are only “footprints of this All” (BĀU 1.4.7). Or they are moves in a deadly game, which evolves toward the negation evident in the final curse. They both express and disguise an identity carrying a powerful destructive charge, which the self-identifying subject resists. For the epic hero, and above all for the epic poets, the language of answers, however “real” or “true,” merely marks the surface of a deeper, enigmatic design.

Notes

1. See Nīlakaṇṭha ad 3.313.45: *kim svid ādityam unnayatīty-ādiprasnottaramālikā ātmanas tattvam nirṇetum ārabdhā* “the series of questions beginning ‘What makes the sun rise?’ sets out to ascertain the truth of the Self.” [I cite, in the following discussion, the Vulgate text of Mbh with Nīlakaṇṭha's commentary, edited by Ramachandrashastri Kinjawadekar (reprinted Delhi, 1979).] The *prāsna*s which concern us in this essay stand in contrast to riddles proper, studied, e.g., by Bhagwat 1955; Mitra 1928; Elwin and Archer 1943; Salomon: this volume; but cf. Bloomfield 1906.

2. See, for example, *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* [BĀU] 3.1–9; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.8. On the notion of “over-questioning,” which leads the questioner to lose his head, see BĀU 3.6 and 3.9.

3. Nīlakaṇṭha notes this movement and refers it to his metaphysical concerns: “The inanimate world of *ahaṅkāra* etc. [the Sāṅkhya *tattvas*] is put into motion by Puruṣa.”

4. See Fernandez 1986: 178–179.

5. Note that the Yakṣaprasna section is immediately preceded by the parallel self-revelation of the sun to his son, Karṇa.

6. The text refers to this entire episode, which we know as the *Āraṇeyaparvan*, as “the great revival and meeting of father and son” (*samutthānasamāgataṁ mahat pituṣ ca putrasya ca*, 3.314.28).

7. Van Buitenen 1975: 803.

8. On fire and speech, see, e.g., BĀU 3.9.24.

9. See the somewhat different perspective of Sutherland 1991: 86–93.

10. See discussion in my paper, Shulman 1994: 1–29.

11. The Javanese tradition of the *Mahābhārata* offers graphic images of this lonely hero, at the end of his life but still unable to die.

12. *tarko 'pratiṣṭhaḥ śrutayo vibhinnā naiko [sic] ṛṣir yasya mataṁ pramāṇam/ dharmasya tattvaṁ nihitaṁ guhāyām mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ /*

13. Cf. Don Handelman 1987 on a *purāṇic* mode of examining theories and contrasting points of view.

14. Ramanujan 1991.

15. J. Prabhakara Sastri, Madison, Wisconsin, April 1988, personal communication. Somewhat similar is the view of Zaehner 1966: 122–124.

16. *Aitareya Āranyaka* 2.3.6; see Malamoud 1989: 252. Cf. *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 8.19.39–40: *satyaṁ puṣpaphalaṁ vidyād ātmavṛkṣasya gīyate/ vṛkṣe 'jīvati tan na syād anṛtaṁ mūlam ātmanaḥ // tad yathā vṛkṣa unmūlaḥ śuśyaty unvartate 'cirāt/ evaṁ naṣṭānṛtaḥ sadya ātmā śuśyen na saṁśyāḥ*.

17. We have here another instance of the repetition/inversion dynamic of the epic; Bandin's intrauterine studies echo those of Abhimanyu, who, however, is prevented from completing them—and pays for this lack with his life.

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9

When Is a Riddle Not a Riddle? Some Comments on Riddling and Related Poetic Devices in Classical Sanskrit

RICHARD SALOMON

The Riddle Tradition in Sanskrit Literature

Although (as will be discussed) the status of riddles in the formal Sanskrit literary tradition is ambiguous at best, their popularity and high degree of development is abundantly attested in various sources. We find riddles of almost every conceivable kind in large numbers, for example, in several of the poetic anthologies, especially in modern traditional-style works such as the *Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra*, in which twenty-three pages¹ are dedicated to riddles and related devices such as word puzzles. These riddles are collected from a variety of sources, including, it would seem, the informal “popular” Sanskrit tradition. There are also special anthologies dedicated exclusively to riddles and the like, among which the most popular is Dharmadāsa’s *Vidagdhamukhamāṇḍana*.² Another fruitful source of riddles is the Sanskrit texts on literary criticism (*alaṃkāra-* or *sāhitya-śāstra*), many of which cite riddling verses by way of illustrations of the definitions of various types of riddles. The literary texts themselves also provide sporadic examples of riddles, usually quoted by the characters in the course of narratives.

Sanskrit riddles have attracted some interest in modern scholarship, though it cannot yet be said that they have been comprehensively or authoritatively treated. The most important work on the subject is Sternbach 1975. Bhagwat 1965 also treats of Sanskrit riddles in detail, along with material in other languages. Otherwise, the modern critical literature is generally limited to briefer studies, such as Porcher 1979, and incidental discussions in works on other subjects.

The Sanskrit term that most closely corresponds to the English “riddle,” and which is usually translated thereby, is *prahelikā*—a term that is not only of uncertain etymology³ but is also subject to widely differing interpretations and classifications. Daṇḍin, in *Kāvyaḍarśa* 3.97–124, enumerated and defined sixteen subcategories of *prahelikā*, though he did not define the general term itself. Later critics and antholo-

gists presented various other systems of categorization of *prahelikā* and related genres of riddle and riddle-like devices,⁴ and in general there is little standardization in their definition and categorization; this situation presumably reflects their marginal position at the fringe of literary acceptability. In general, the critics, like Daṇḍin, do not offer definitions of *prahelikā* as such; for such a definition we turn to the *Vidagdhamukhamāṇḍana* 4.1:

*vyaktīkṛtya kamapy artham svarūpārthasya gopanāt /
yatra bāhyāntarāv arthau kathyete sā prahelikā //*

That is *prahelikā* in which both an outer and an inner sense are expressed, making one meaning visible by disguising the real meaning.

Without going into the complex details of the many traditional classes of riddles,⁵ it may be worthwhile to give a few characteristic examples. First of all, we sometimes find—particularly in the anthologies—specimens of what might be called folk riddles—that is, riddles in which ordinary everyday objects are described in a disguised or misleading fashion. A typical example is found in the *Subhāṣitaratna-bhāṇḍāgāra*:⁶

- (1) *apado dūragāmī ca sākṣaro na ca paṇḍitaḥ /
amukhaḥ sphuṭavaktā ca yo jānāti sa paṇḍitaḥ //*

He has no feet, yet travels far; literate, but no scholar he; no mouth, yet he clearly speaks. If you know him, you are wise.

Answer: *lekhapatram*, a letter.

Or, from the same source:

- (2) *ekacakṣur na kāko 'yaṁ bilam icchan na pannagaḥ /
kṣīyate vardhate caiva na samudro na candramāḥ //*⁷

It has one eye, but is no crow; looks for holes, but is no snake. It grows and shrinks, yet is neither moon nor ocean.

Answer: *sūcikā*, a needle.

As in other cultures, these folk riddles frequently take on a sexual component. This may be only apparent (the “sexual teaser” riddle), as in the preceding riddle, or more explicit, as in *Vidagdhamukhamāṇḍana* 4.3:⁸

- (3) *tarunyālingitaḥ kaṇṭhe nitambasthalaṁ āśritaḥ /
gurūṇām saṁnidhāne 'pi kaḥ kūjati muhur muhuḥ //*

Who is this that moans over and over, while his girl clings to his neck as he rides her hips, even when their elders are around?

Answer: A water-jug;

or actual:

- (4) *chatradhārī na rājāsau jaṭādhārī na ceśvaraḥ /
sṛṣṭikartā na sa brahma chidrakartā na taskaraḥ //*⁹

He has an umbrella, but is no king; matted locks, but is not Śiva. He is a creator, but not Brahman; breaks into holes, but not a thief.

Answer: *pumdhvajah*, a penis.

In the same sources, we also find specimens of what might be called modified folk riddles, wherein some linguistic component—this being the outstanding characteristic of almost all of the more sophisticated varieties of Sanskrit riddles—is introduced. Thus, for example, the first and last syllables of the answer are provided:

- (5) *vrksasyāgre phalaṃ dṛṣṭam phalāgre vrkṣa eva ca /
akārādi sakārāntaṃ yo jñāti sa paṇḍitaḥ* //¹⁰

The fruit is seen on top of the tree, and the tree is on top of the fruit. It begins with A and ends with S; if you know it, you are wise.

Answer: *ananasa*, a pineapple.

In the next example, a slightly more subtle type of linguistic hint is introduced, by way of playing on the grammatical gender of the objects described:

- (6) *naranārīsamutpannā sā strī dehavivarjitā /
amukhī kurute śabdāṃ jātāmātrā vinaśyati* //¹¹

Born of male and female, this woman has no body; no mouth, yet she makes noise; and she dies the instant she is born.

Answer: *choṭikā*, a snap of the finger. The answer is a feminine noun, hence “this woman;” she is “born of” the thumb (*aṅguṣṭha*, masculine) and the middle finger (*madhyamā*, feminine).

Commoner, however, in the various literary sources are more sophisticated techniques of disguise and deception, most of which are once again language-based; for example:

- (7) *ya evādiḥ sa evānto madhye bhavati madhyamaḥ /
ya etan nābhijānīyāt tṛṇamātraṃ na vetti saḥ* //¹²

The apparent meaning of the riddle is:

He who is the beginning is also the end; and the middle one is in the middle.

Anyone who doesn’t recognize this doesn’t even know a blade of grass.

But the real sense is:

(The letter) Y is at the beginning, S is at the end, and a “middle letter” [i.e., V, a semi-vowel] is in the middle.

Thus the answer is *yavasam*, a blade of grass. The riddle plays on the ambiguity of the syllables *ya* and *sa*, placed so as to appear to be the masculine relative and correlative pronouns, respectively, but actually meaning simply “the letters Y and S.” The “challenge” phrase, “a blade of grass,” also constitutes a cleverly disguised clue; while seemingly referring to the idiomatic Sanskrit expression for “next to nothing,” it actually provides the answer to the riddle itself.

Such sophisticated techniques are developed at great length in Sanskrit riddles, and are classified by the critics and anthologists into numerous types and subtypes. In the *gupta*, or hidden riddles, for instance, one crucial element of the sentence is disguised; these riddles are subdivided into those in which the apparently missing part is the verb (*kriyā-gupta*), the agent (*kartr-gupta*), the object (*karma-gupta*), and so on. Here is an example of the “hidden-agent” type:

- (8) *gaurīnakharasādrśyaśraddhayā śaśinaṃ dadhau /
ihaiva gopyate kartā varseṇāpi na labhyate* //¹³

The apparent meaning, in which the subject/agent seems to be missing, is

????? wore the moon because it reminded him of Gaurī's nails. The subject is hidden right here, but you won't find it even in a year.

But the phrase *ihaiva*, which apparently means "right here," actually means "The slayer [-hā] of Kāma [-i-] himself (*eva*)," i.e. Śiva. Thus the real meaning is

Śiva himself wore the moon

Note that here, too, as in the previous example, the riddle is cleverly contrived in such a way that the riddlee is made to feel all the more foolish if he cannot solve it, for the missing part is mockingly concealed under the very words "right here!"

These and similar techniques are often further developed with various complex applications, wherein, for example, the solutions to a series of smaller riddles must be combined to provide the answer to another riddle.¹⁴ But, though usually discussed in connection with *prahelikā* or riddling, such complex tricks would exceed the bounds of what would normally be considered riddles¹⁵ and are perhaps better described as word puzzles. This is also true of the *samasyās* or problem verses and *citra-kāvyas* or figured verses, which are also usually discussed along with riddles and the like. In function, and to some extent in form, these complex genres are more like our crossword puzzles than riddles.

But despite their evidently extensive cultivation in literary circles, *prahelikās* and some of the related riddle-like genres never attained full acceptance as legitimate literary devices. Daṇḍin, an important early (eighth century A.D.) literary critic, did accept *prahelikā*¹⁶ as a figure of speech (*alaṃkāra*, literally "ornament"), but as an "ornament of sound" (*śabdālaṃkāra*), rather than an "ornament of sense" (*arthālaṃkāra*) as might have been expected. According to Porcher,¹⁷ this may reflect a somewhat grudging acceptance as "a minor genre" of *prahelikās* at all, and this attitude is confirmed by Daṇḍin's other restrictions on them; they are recommended only for secret communication among cognoscenti in a public audience (*krīḍāgoṣṭhīvinodeṣu tajjair ākīrṇamantraṇe*) or for the purpose of intentionally misleading others (*paravyāmohane*). Other critics are even more disapproving of riddles, and in general the later critics do not accept them as *alaṃkāras* at all. Thus Rudraṭa (ninth century) considers them to be useful for amusement only (*krīḍāmātropayogam*¹⁸), while Viśvanātha (fourteenth century) explicitly rejects *prahelikā* as an *alaṃkāra* on the grounds that it is an "obstacle to poetic enjoyment," useful only for introducing variety into one's diction (*rasasya paripanthitvān nālaṃkāraḥ prahelikā uktivaicitryamātram sā*).¹⁹ Besides the inherently problematic literary status of riddles, their frequently erotic or pseudo-erotic content (as in examples 2 through 4 above) no doubt also affected their reception by the somewhat rigid and puritanical literary critics; Daṇḍin perhaps has such types in mind when he briefly alludes to the fourteen "bad riddles" (*duṣṭapraheḷikāḥ*),²⁰ which he declines to enumerate or discuss.

But although riddles as such are generally rejected as legitimate literary devices, other unanimously accepted figures of speech include at least some of the characteristic features of the riddle. Certain developments of the sound ornament *yamaka*, or syllabic repetition, for example, come to be something like riddles; for instance the *samudga-yamaka*, in which the same half-verse is repeated, but interpreted differently (mainly by changing word boundaries) each time, to constitute a full verse.²¹ Such verses, which seem to be nonsensically repetitive at first glance, must be reinterpreted to make sense and hence constitute something like a riddle, or perhaps rather a word puzzle;²² they are roughly comparable to modern English riddles of the type,

What's the difference between a cocktail lounge and an elephant's fart?—One is
a bar-room and the other is a 'barroom!'

But the figure of speech that bears the closest resemblance to riddles proper, and which will be the main subject of the remainder of this chapter, is the sense ornament (*arthālaṃkāra*) *virodha*, “contradiction,” or more accurately *virodhābhāsa*, “illusion of contradiction.”

The Figure Virodhābhāsa and Its Relation to Riddles

Unlike the marginal *prahelikā* and related devices, the figure *virodha/virodhābhāsa* is unanimously accepted by the critics and widely used by the poets; indeed, it is one of the most popular of the classical *arthālaṃkāras*. As its name indicates, this figure involves the poetic manipulation of (apparent) contradiction or paradox; hence it is comparable to, though not identical with, oxymoron. The critics are not unanimous, however, as to the precise definition of the figure and the relationship between *virodha* (contradiction) and *virodhābhāsa* (illusion of contradiction). Some of them distinguish the two as separate figures (e.g., Rudraṭa),²³ while others such as Ruyyaka (*viruddhābhāsatvaṃ virodhaḥ*)²⁴ explicitly state that the two are really the same, since a poetic contradiction *must* be only apparent; a *real* contradiction would be artistically unacceptable. These technicalities, however, need not detain us here,²⁵ except to clarify that we will be specifically concerned here with the figure in which the paradox is apparent only, that is, with *virodhābhāsa* as opposed to *virodha*; although according to some authorities the two are the same, we will use the more specific term in order to avoid ambiguity. Neither will we be much concerned with the traditional subcategorization of this figure into types involving genus, attribute, action, and individual (*jāti*, *guṇa*, *kriyā*, *dravya*) and various combinations thereof. Our concern will be primarily with the techniques of deception—mainly involving punning (*śleṣa*) of various types—whereby a situation or action is made to appear paradoxical when in reality it is not.²⁶

Among the several definitions of *virodhābhāsa* given by various critics, the most appropriate for the present context is probably that of Rudraṭa:

*sa iti virodhābhāso yasminn arthadvayaṃ prthagbhūtam /
anyad vākyam gamayed aviruddham sadviruddham iva* ||²⁷

That is “Illusion of Contradiction” wherein one sentence gives two separate and different senses, which are [actually] not contradictory but appear to be so.

Note, first of all, the similarity of this definition to Dharmadāsa's definition of *prahelikā*, or riddle, quoted in the preceding section. They have in common the simultaneous expression of two meanings—one real, the other illusory. The principal difference would seem to be only a matter of intentionality; in the riddle, there is an explicit intention to disguise the true meaning (*svārūpārthasya gopānāt*), whereas in *virodhābhāsa*, the ambiguity is artful, rather than deceitful in intent. This, from the critics' standpoint, would also explain why *virodhābhāsa* is a legitimate figure while *prahelikā* is not; in the latter, the intentional obscurity constitutes an "obstacle to poetic enjoyment," in Viśvanātha's words (quoted in the preceding section), whereas in the latter, the complexity of construction enhances rather than impedes the poetic charm. From a practical point of view, the distinction is a fine one, however, and we can see from the beginning that there is a close relationship between these two poetic devices.

This preliminary impression is reinforced in practice by many examples of *virodhābhāsa* which are structurally reminiscent of modern popular riddles; for example, in Bāṇa's *Kādambarī*²⁸ King Śūdraka is described as *atisuddhasvabhāvam api kṛṣṇacaritam*, apparently meaning "completely pure in character, yet of black deeds;" the apparent contradiction is resolved by interpreting *kṛṣṇa* as a proper name rather than as the adjective "black," so that the second phrase really means "whose deeds were like those of Kṛṣṇa." With this we can compare the hoary children's riddle "What's black and white and red [read] all over?" Answer: "A newspaper." In both cases, a word apparently describing the color of the object of description must be reinterpreted paronomastically to eliminate the apparent paradox. (Other parallels between *virodhābhāsa*s and English riddles will be noted below.) Thus, like riddles, *virodhābhāsa*s have solutions; these are typically given by the commentators under the terms *parihāra* (the avoidance of apparent paradox) or *samādhāna* (reconciliation).

The classic example of *virodhābhāsa* is the one given by Rudraṭa in the illustrative verse which follows his definition cited earlier:

- (9) *tava dakṣiṇo 'pī vāmo balabhadro 'pi pralamba eṣa bhujaḥ /*
*duryodhano 'pi rājan yudhiṣṭhiro 'stīty aho citram //*²⁹

Apparent meaning: "Your arm, O King, though right, is left; though Balabhadra it is Pralamba; though Duryodhana, it is Yudhiṣṭhira.³⁰ O what a marvel is this!"

The real meaning, arrived at by reinterpreting the adjectives and apparent proper nouns in their common or etymological senses, is:

"Your arm, O King, though kindly [towards those who are faithful to you] is dangerous [to your enemies]; great in strength [*balabhadro*] and also long [*pralamba*]; hard to fight [*duryodhano*] and also unwavering in battle [*yudhiṣṭhiro*]; O what a marvel is this!"

Here two types of word play are used to produce creative ambiguity (but for the imagined objections of the traditional critics, I would have preferred to say techniques of deception):

- The first is ordinary punning, based on the application of different (though related) meanings for the adjectives *dakṣiṇa* (right/kindly) and *vāma* (left/dangerous)
- The second is a special type of punning, much exploited in *virodhābhāsa* verses generally (and already seen above), on proper name/common noun interpretations, a technique that is naturally convenient and productive in a language wherein most proper names are etymologically transparent.

In terms of the structure of the figure *virodhābhāsa*, the application here of the adversative particle *api* (although) is characteristic, and indeed often serves as a warning sign that *virodhābhāsa* is involved. But³¹ this figure can also be marked by *ca* in the sense of “and also/yet,” or it may not be explicitly marked at all. It should also be noted that this verse, as is not uncommonly the case, is a multiple *virodhābhāsa*, the figure being applied in the verse three times, separately but in parallel.

Many examples of the techniques involved in the construction of *virodhābhāsa* can be conveniently found in the works (the *Harṣacarita* and the *Kādambarī*) of the great prose-poet Bāṇa, who, as noted by Kane,³² was a master of this figure. Although these examples are slightly atypical in that they are in prose rather than verse, they otherwise present perfectly standard classical usages and are cited here because they provide a convenient sampling in a short passage of several kinds of *virodhābhāsa*. The passage quoted here, like most of Bāṇa’s *virodhābhāsas*, comes at the end of one of his characteristically long descriptive passages. A typical construction of these passages would have a long series of nominal-adjectival descriptive phrases modifying the main subject, followed by a set of phrases utilizing a common “figure of sense” such as simile (*upamā*), and then, at or near the end of the entire passage, a set of descriptive phrases with *virodhābhāsa*. This latter figure thus often functions as a climax to these extended descriptions. Such is the case in the passage selected here as an illustration, which appears at the very end of the description of the Vāt-syāyana line of *brāhmaṇas* in the *Harṣacarita*.³³

- (10) [a] *sarvagūṇopetā rājasenānabhibhūtaḥ*, [b] *kṣamābhāja āśritanandanāḥ*, [c] *anistriṃśā vidyādharaḥ*, [d] *ajādāḥ kalāvantaḥ*, [e] *adoṣās tārakāḥ*, [f] *aparopatāpino bhāsvantaḥ*, [g] *anusmāṇo hutabhujāḥ*, [h] *akusṛtayo bhoginaḥ*, [i] *astambhāḥ punyālayāḥ*, [j] *aluptakratukriyāḥ dakṣāḥ*, [k] *avyālāḥ kāmajitāḥ asādhāraṇā dvijātayaḥ*.³⁴

[a] endowed with all the *guṇas* yet unaffected by [the *guṇa* of] passion (endowed with all virtues and immune to the armies of kings); [b] dwellers on the earth, yet living in heaven (possessed of forbearance and delighting their dependents); [c] Vidyādharaḥ without swords (kindly and keepers of knowledge); [d] not cool, yet moons (not dull, and artful); [e] stars without darkness (faultless saviors); [f] suns that do not burn hot (not troubling others, and glorious); [g] fires without heat (mild-mannered sacrificers); [h] snakes who do not crawl on the ground (deceitless and happy); [i] temples without pillars (unconceited repositories of virtue); [j] Dakṣas whose sacrifices are not interrupted (never failing to offer sacrifices, and skillful); [k] Śivas without snakes (undecieving, and conquering lust); such were these extraordinary brahmanas.

Several different tactics of ambiguation or concealment can be discerned among these *virodhābhāsas*. We have first of all the simple pun, in which the same word

can be interpreted with two different senses, as for example with *kṣamā* (earth/forbearance) and *nandana* (grove of heaven/delighting) in [b]. (Here, as is often but by no means always the case, the punning is doubled, involving both members of the seemingly paradoxical phrase.) Similarly with *ajaḍāḥ* (not cool/not dull) and *kalāvantaḥ* (moons/artful) in [d], and so on in many others. Many English riddles utilize similar techniques; for example, “When is coffee like the earth?—When it is ground,” playing on the homonymy and consequent ambiguity between the verbal participle and the noun “ground.”³⁵

The punning may also depend on a distinction between the ordinary etymological sense (*yoga*) of a word and its secondary or conventional sense (*rūḍhi*), as in [c], where etymologically *vidyādhara* means “keepers of knowledge,” and conventionally “a type of semi-divine being” (always portrayed with a sword, whence the pun). Here we might compare English riddles in which illusory paradoxes are created by exploiting confusion between the ordinary and idiomatic usage of words, as in “What turns but never moves?—Milk.”³⁶

Another common strategy in *virodhābhāsa*, as already noted, involves punning on the same word as common noun and as proper name. Here we find this favorite technique in [j]: *dakṣa* (skillful/name of a mythological personage whose sacrifice was interrupted by the angry Śiva).

Besides the puns on single or compound words, the poet often seeks to trick the reader by playing on word boundaries (*sabhaṅga-śleṣa*, “division punning,” in traditional terms). Thus, in [a] above, the apparent reading is *rājasena+anabhibhūtāḥ* (unaffected by the [*guṇa* of] passion), but the *parihāra* reading or solution is *rājasenā+anabhibhūtāḥ* (immune to the armies [*senā*] of kings [*rāja*]). Here, too, we can find parallels in common English riddles of the type “When is a door not a door?—When it is a jar [ajar].”³⁷

Finally, *virodhābhāsa* may depend not only on puns and related manipulations of individual words but also on contrasts between literal and figurative interpretations. For instance, elsewhere in the *Harṣacarita*³⁸ the emperor Harṣa is characterized as *grhītabrahmacaryam ālingitam rājalakṣmyā* (who had taken a vow of chastity, [yet] was embraced by the Goddess of Royal Fortune). Here, the apparent contradiction arises from a literal interpretation of the phrase “embraced by the Goddess of Royal Fortune,” which is, of course, actually to be taken in the figurative sense of “blessed by royal fortune.”

The Literary Functions and Refinements of Virodhābhāsa

In the more or less typical passages cited in the preceding section, we find abundant examples of the riddle-like figure *virodhābhāsa* used in purely literary contexts in which it plays a merely decorative—one might almost say trivial—role. But this is not the whole story. In other texts, we find *virodhābhāsa* used in a more serious function, for the figure is frequently employed in hymns, or *stotras*, wherein it serves not merely to ornament the poet’s language but to hint at the ineffably mysterious character of the deity who embraces within himself all opposites. In Kālidāsa’s *Raghuvamśa*,³⁹ for example, the gods sing to their overlord Viṣṇu:

- (11) *ajasya gr̥h̥nato janma nir̥hasya hatadviṣaḥ /
svapato jāgarūkasya yāthārthyam veda kas tava //*

Who can know your true essence—you who though unborn have taken birth; you who do not act yet have slain your enemies; you who sleep yet are ever wakeful?

Here the gods (or the poet) employ three *virodhābhāsa*s in an attempt to express the mystery of the nature of this unknowable being, even though he is ultimately “beyond the reach of word and mind” (*avāḥmanasagocaram*).⁴⁰

Similarly, it is surely no coincidence that in Bhiṣma’s eulogy of Kṛṣṇa’s divinity in Māgha’s *Śisupālavadha*⁴¹ the predominant figure of speech is *virodha/virodhābhāsa*,⁴² used in terms very similar to those of the Kālidāsa verse just quoted. For instance:

- (12) *satyavṛttam api māyinaṃ jagadvṛddham apy ucitanidram arbhakam /
janma bibhratam ajam navaṃ budhā yaṃ purāṇapurusaṃ pracakṣate //*⁴³

[Kṛṣṇa,] whom the wise men say acts truthfully, yet is possessed of illusion; as ancient as the world, yet sleeping like a baby; unborn, yet taking birth; the ancient spirit, ever new.

Of course, the use of paradox to express the ineffable is nothing new, in India as elsewhere; in *Īśa-upaniṣad* 5, for instance, we find a classic example:

- (13) *tad ejati tan naijati tad dūre tad v antike /
tad antar asya sarvasya tad u sarvasyāśya bāhyataḥ //*

It moves and it moves not; it is far and it is near; it is within this whole (world) and outside of it.

What is striking in these classical passages is the expression of metaphysical paradox in the shape of a formal poetic device, namely *virodhābhāsa*. This more profound use of the figure differs significantly from its decorative poetic function in the passages cited earlier in this chapter, in that here the resolution of the apparent paradox lies not in verbal jugglery of the kind seen before but in the mystery of the all-encompassing essence of the supreme deity. Thus the commentator (Mallinātha on 14.60) explains that the solution of the apparent paradoxes in the verses of *Śisupālavadha* lies in the incomprehensible majesty of Kṛṣṇa (*harer acintyamahimatvena samādhānād virodhābhāsaḥ*). What began, in other words, as a poetic refinement of simple riddling has risen in the end to the level of cosmic enigma.

In conclusion: while riddles as such were always restricted in the Sanskrit tradition to the outer fringes of literary respectability, there developed certain formal poetic devices, notably *virodhābhāsa*, which in fact partook of much of the character of the ordinary humble folk riddle, especially as it tended to develop in the highly linguistically self-conscious environment of classical India, showing a strong preference for punning and other language-based techniques of concealment. For all their sophistication, the linguistic strategies employed in Sanskrit *virodhābhāsa*s can be fruitfully compared, *mutatis mutandis*, to similar “linguistic techniques” used in English riddles as analyzed in Pepicello.⁴⁴ Although *virodhābhāsa* was not considered by the traditional critics to be directly related to riddles (*prahelikā*), it nonetheless does clearly share many characteristic features with it, and hence can be seen as a sort of sophisticated riddling device which made its way, through the back door so to speak, into the realms of literary respectability.

Notes

1. Nārāyaṇa Rāma 1978: 184–207.
2. For other texts of this class, see Sternbach 1975: 96ff.
3. Bhagwat 1965: 20–22; Sternbach 1975: 34.
4. Sternbach 1975: 38–39, 52.
5. For which the reader is referred to *ibid.*, 38ff.
6. Nārāyaṇa Rāma 1978: 184, no. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, 185, no. 11.
8. Quoted in *ibid.*, 184, no. 8.
9. *Ibid.*, 185, no. 12.
10. *Ibid.*, 185, no. 23.
11. *Ibid.*, 185, no. 15.
12. *Ibid.*, 185, no. 18.
13. *Ibid.*, 194, no. 18.
14. For examples, see Sternbach 1975: 67ff.
15. I make this claim somewhat arbitrarily, without wishing to address the difficult problem of the precise definition of a riddle, but taking it for granted that conciseness is one characteristic feature thereof.
16. Shastri 1938: 3.96–124.
17. Porcher 1979: 330.
18. Durgāprasād and Paṇṣīkar 1928: 5.24.
19. Kane 1974: 10.13–14.
20. Shastri 1938: 3.106.
21. Definitions and examples in *ibid.*, 3.53–56.
22. Bhāmaha (Sastry 1970: 2.19) explicitly noted the relationships between *yamaka* and *prahelikā* (*yamakavyapadeśinī prahelikā*).
23. Durgāprasād and Paṇṣīkar 1928: 9.30 and 10.22.
24. Durgāprasād and Parab 1982: 121–122.
25. For further information, see Gerow 1971: 265–269; Hīrā 1973: 1193–1199, and Jenner 1968: 239–244.
26. For an examination along similar lines of the deceptive techniques employed in the various kinds of *prahelikā* enumerated by Daṇḍin, see Porcher 1979.
27. Durgāprasād and Paṇṣīkar: 10.22.
28. Kale 1968: 21.
29. Durgāprasād and Paṇṣīkar: 10.23.
30. Balabhadra and Pralamba, and Duryodhana and Yudhiṣṭhira, are proverbial enemies in the epics.
31. As noted by Trikha 1982: 202ff.
32. Kane 1974: notes, 245.
33. In the translation, the apparent meaning of each phrase is given first, followed by the real meaning in parentheses. The word “yet” is introduced into the translation as implied by the context, although these *virodhābhāsas* are of the type which are not explicitly marked by a particle such as *api* or *ca*.
34. Kane 1973: 18.
35. Pepicello 1980: 2.
36. *Ibid.*, 2.
37. Word division puns often involve manipulation of Sanskrit sandhi rules of phonetic juncture and change between words. Also, in *virodhābhāsa* [h], an alternative interpretation (adopted by Kane 1973: 87) reads [']*bhogināḥ* (not addicted to pleasure) in the *parihāra* reading. It is not absolutely clear whether the author really intended this pun; commentators often strive, sometime to excess, to maximize the amount of paradoxicality. (Note that Kane

1973 also takes the concluding phrase *asādhāraṇā dvijātayaḥ* as another *virodhābhāsa*, by what seems to me a rather forced interpretation.)

38. Kane 1973: 32.
39. Nārāyaṇa Rāma 1948: 10.24.
40. Ibid., 10.15.
41. *Śiśupālavadha* 1894: 14.59–87.
42. *Śiśupālavadha* 1894: 14.60, 62, 69, 70, 72, 74, 76, 81.
43. *Śiśupālavadha* 1894: 14.70.
44. Pepicello 1980.

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10

Why an Allama Poem Is Not a Riddle: An Anthological Essay

A. K. RAMANUJAN

Sir, if a man has experienced the inexpressible, he is under no obligation to express it.

Dr Johnson

I.

In an earlier work, I have written in some detail about Vīraśaiva *bhakti*—the devotional religion of iconoclastic poets from the medieval Deccan in south India.¹ For instance, the saint-poet Basava rejects caste, ritual, temples, sacred space and sacred time, the Vedas, and the Śāstras (systematized knowledge). I suggested that all these add up to what we would call “structure,” which implies predictability. A grammar, a structural description, codifies what is predictable in a language. With grammar we render a language predictable; we feel then that we can control it, teach it, and see it as a code we have observed or broken, relegating the rest to lexicon, idiom, and idiosyncrasy. But in the conception of these saints, the experience of god, *anubhāva* as against *anubhava*, Experience with a capital *E* as against experience with a lowercase *e*, is not predictable; it cannot be captured in scripture or explained by the Śāstras. It cannot be coaxed, wheedled, or enforced by any technique. It is not amenable to “magic” in the strict sense, of which rituals and “techniques of ecstasy” (Eliade’s phrase) are a part. The most radical Vīraśaivas won’t have anything to do with such manipulations. Only miracle, grace, the “unmediated vision,” will do for them. So they are against all structure—which seeks to predict, construct, domesticate, and banalize the experience of god. Taking issue with Victor Turner’s earlier formulations, I had suggested that this was an instance of “anti-structure,” opposed to the very idea of structure, not itself an example of antistructure or a way of being without any structure. For the culture and community of these radical saints did have (inevitably) a structure of its own, an oppositional counterstructure made up of selected elements from the very structure they railed against. Only one

of these oppositional elements, the suspicion and rejection of language, is our present concern.

The most radical of these rejectors of structure (social, intellectual, religious) is Allama Prabhu. Though passionate, he is imperious in tone.² Of the four major Vīraśaiva saints (Basavaṇṇa, Devara Dāsimayya, Mahādeviyakka, and Allama) he alone composes many *bēḍagina vacanas* (fancy poems), obscure riddle-like questioning poems that participate in an ancient and pan-Indian tradition of *sandhābhāsha* (twilight language) or *ulṭa baṁsi* (reversed or topsy-turvy language)—examples of which go back to the Vedas and the Upanishads, and in the mother-tongues to the *caryāgītis*.³ Allama probably predates the *caryāgītis*. I suspect the presence of a wide network of Nātha and other esoteric cults with a common pool saturated with ideas, motifs, paradoxes, imagery, and poetic genres in which poets like Allama steeped their poetic works and brought them up encrusted with crystals. So, unlike the modern surrealists, they did not depend on dream, automatic writing, Ouija boards, and other ways of enticing the unconscious. To Allama, as to Kabīr and the Tamil Siddhas, a second language other than their own Kannada, Bhojpuri, or Tamil was ready to hand. This second language may draw on the vocabulary of Yoga, Tantra, and Nātha practice and imagery, even while rejecting them as systems and techniques. I shall return to this theme.

This second language, this language within language, contrasts with other such second languages. For instance, *saguṇa* poets, poets who devote themselves to god in his well-formed states, gods with bodies, parts and passions, share another such second language—that of myths, temples, holy places, lists of holy names and attributes, and the motifs and genres of erotic poetry. *Saguṇa* poets like Cuntarar or Nammālvār in Tamil, Sūr in Hindi, Mahādevi in Kannada, Vidyāpati in Bengali may all use parts of this other second language to sing, praise, scold, invoke, and certainly describe, not just circumscribe, their gods, whether Śiva or Viṣṇu. Their gods are *saguṇa*, have qualities and forms: as said earlier, they have “body, parts, passion,” have *avatāras* or incarnations, or *līlās* or sports. Temples, icons, mythologies, and poems of love and praise are their regular domain. To these poet-saints, becoming one with their god is not the goal. As one of them said, “If you become sugar yourself, how can you taste it?” Seeing, hearing, especially touching, tasting and smelling, intensifying all the senses and feelings especially in sexual intimacy—these are characteristic modes of their experience. Sensation, desire, feelings of all kinds in the I-Thou mode are the staple of these poems. Not only characters, complexions, and tones of voice but also contagion, communion, community, and congregation are central to this way of seeking and being with god.

The imagery of an Allama poem has none of this. The nearest he comes to it is in a poem like the following:

Looking for your light,
I went out:

it was like the sudden dawn
of a million million suns,
a ganglion of lightnings
for my wonder.

Lord of Caves, if you are light,
there can be no metaphor. (972*)

While Nammālvār never tires of describing his god, Allama despairs of language and even of poetry and makes a poem (like other poets) of not being able to make a poem. Note how he uses a famous metaphor for the vision of god, “a ganglion of lightnings” (made famous by the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which Oppenheimer quoted when he first saw the world-destroying flash of atomic fission), and how then Allama negates it in the last line.

Metaphor, self-contradiction, oxymoron, and paradox are all used by Allama separately and as parts of his riddle poems. These figures are what Sanskrit poeticians would call *arthālaṅkāra* (figures of sense and of thought), in contrast to *śabdālaṅkāra* (figures of sound, like alliteration and assonance). Figures of sense play with the logical syntax of language, with linguistic relationships. As Jakobson showed,⁴ metaphoric figures are paradigmatic, while metonymic figures are syntagmatic. These two basic dimensions are, of course, not independent of each other; they are also variously projected onto each other, especially in poetry: lists project the paradigmatic onto the syntagmatic, and parallelisms project the syntagmatic onto the paradigmatic.

Metaphor, oxymoron, and paradox have a logical structure in common—and riddles use all three figures. For instance, the riddle “It’s a house without a door” turns on the metaphor “house without a door.” We know it’s a metaphor once we know the answer, “an egg.” Riddles use the familiar taken-for-granted dichotomies of the culture and the language: for instance, cultural objects/natural objects (here, house/egg). One is described as the other, resulting in a metaphor. The two objects have a common semantic feature: a house and an egg both enclose space.

But houses must have doors, by definition; a house without a door is a self-contradiction. It is also a paradox, because it goes against common knowledge (common sense, or *sensus communis*) within the culture. Paradox requires a *sensus communis*, but oxymoron does not. The two are often mixed.

All three figures, which meet in this riddle, can occur separately, and outside riddles:

“That house is egg-shaped” is a metaphor.

“Nothing fails like success” (Oscar Wilde) is an oxymoron (and a paradox).

“Lead us not into the paths of virtue” (Wilde) and “the seven deadly virtues” are paradoxes because they flout a culture’s values.

They all depend on a common logical form, “A has a feature f.” If B also has a feature f, we have the basis for a metaphor. If A has a feature f, but also has a feature –f, we have an oxymoron. “You all think A has a feature f, but here it doesn’t,” is the basis of a paradox. Metaphors are based on the assertion of a feature; oxymorons and paradoxes depend on negations.

Allama is quite aware of his use of riddle forms: he often ends his poems with a challenge formula that belongs to riddles proper: *hela* (Tell me [what it means]) or *helaballavararu?* (Who can tell me? or Only those who can tell me what this is know what truth is like).

Saṅga saint-poets, to my knowledge, don't often pose these riddles. Cuntarar in Tamil, Basava or Akka in Kannada, Nammālvār in Tamil, and Vidyāpati in Bengali are not known for their riddle poems as are Kabīr in Hindi, Allama in Kannada, Lalou Shah in Bengali, or the Cittars in Tamil. The latter are *nirguṇa* poets: they believe that god is "formless" and "beyond words." They negate the world of *nāma* and *rūpa* (names and forms) not just for god; they see names and forms (Hindu categorical imperatives?) as creating illusions in man's phenomenal world. So they have little use for *mantra*, *tantra*, and other such "techniques of ecstasy," for speculations and thought systems like theologies and *śāstras* and the Vedas, as well as for symbol systems like language, poetry, figures of speech, and mythologies—everything, that is, that poets, thinkers, and religious men live on, or live off of. Yet these naysayers have to say nay in language, poetry, figure, and literary genre. For "negation," as Kenneth Burke says, is not to be found in nature but only in language. It actually requires language. Moreover, to negate one has to first name, mention, and thereby affirm the existence of what is negated—as in Freud's example, "I had a dream about someone and she didn't at all look like my mother." Negations affirm, as both Freud and Śaṅkara tell us. It's like the magic carpet story. A man buys a carpet, and the seller tells him that it will fly on one condition: the man who sits on it should never think of flying. Of course, the carpet never leaves the ground.

2.

There are two kinds of poems in the Allama oeuvre: those that describe by negating description and those that describe an experience in positive terms. Examples follow.

The light in the eye cannot be imagined.
 The sound in the ear cannot be described.
 The taste in the tongue cannot find its counterparts.
 The Central Nerve [*suṣumnā*] vital to awareness cannot be proved:
 In atom, particle, in grass, in wood,
 subtle, without end and without bottom [*nirāla*],
 dwells our Lord of Caves. (67)

In the black iris of the eye, fourteen worlds.
 The show puts on its show:
 look at the strings that move the puppets!
 And that energy in the depths of stillness [*nirāla*],
 that's the Lord of Caves. (68)

Unlike the poems of other Vīraśaiva saints, Allama's poems speak for the man who has known Union, speaks of Union more than the mystic's ascent, descent or the struggle toward it. He is, in Kierkegaard's phrase, the butterfly who has forgotten he was once the caterpillar:

It's not an image, no *mūrti* made of the body
 nor of life and breath,
 not an image made by past good deeds, nor of liberation,
 not an image made by the ages and aeons,

not made of Śiva, not made of Śakti :
how can I then metaphor this image?
A body that cannot be seen,
a lustre that cannot be envisioned,
a stance for which there are no metaphors:

how can I speak, O Lord of Caves,
of this joy made visible
and how can I speak of causes?⁵

All the cultural baggage of concepts—body, breath, good deeds, liberation, ages, Śiva and Śakti, vision, metaphor, finally the logic of causation—all of it is negated and jettisoned. The joy that the poem speaks of is defined by negations, not described but circumscribed by all that it's not:

Devotee, devotee, they cry!
Before they shed their dependence on earth,
on water,
on light,
on air,
on sky and sun and moon,
and on the soul [*ātma*]

they call themselves devotees
who worship the Liṅga,
and I'm amazed at them,
O Lord of Caves.⁶

Such experience is without precedent, without models, as the next poem says:

There has been nothing like this before:
had it been so, how could this be?
It is because it isn't,
so it has happened this way.

Like longings from all directions
reaching their end,
that Liṅga of the Lord of Caves,
took my body towards it.

Because it has never happened before, it has no language.

When the Liṅga that cannot be seen
comes to my hand,
I cannot speak, I cannot ask.
This to me is a wonder of wonders.
That Liṅga called the Lord of Caves
is sheer space, is nothing, is without form:
if it should take form
and come to my hand,
I cannot speak, I cannot ask.⁷

Sir,
when the earth had not spread and settled yet,
on water, tortoise, elephant, or snake,

when the sky was not yet,
 when there was no sign of wind,
 when fire had yet no flames,
 when plant, hill, grass, and tree were not yet,
 when the fourteen worlds spilling
 over ages and aeons
 were not established,
 when the three lords of the worlds
 who say they know the truth
 were not yet,
 in a stance that shows and shines forth
 the unreachable Lord of Caves, the *Liṅga*,
 was there.

Having known it once (if that's any kind of knowing as we know it), one wants to return to it, and can do so not by one's will but only through Guheswara's:

Show me
 that walking without feet,
 touching without hands,
 tasting without a tongue,
 show me how that Other, that Absolute,
 begs, with all Feeling for a begging bowl,
 begs 'Give me now the Absolute.'
 Show me that, O Lord of Caves.

If you can't do that, he sometimes says, show me at least others who have attained it—the one concession to tradition that Allama makes. And they use their senses differently than others do:

Show me those who
 with the eye for a beggar's staff,
 hands for a begging bowl,
 ears no other than the kindness of all the Ancients,
 eating the alms only of the heart,
 have evolved the body to its end,
 show me those great ones,
 O Lord of Caves. (77)

Notice, how the whole body, and the senses earlier rejected as its empirical illusions, are rededicated, often made into a kind of metaphor, the sensorium moved toward its own evolution (*pariṇāma*): here the *aṅga* (body) and *liṅga* (the Absolute) have become one, as they always should have been, as the rhyming words—*aṅga*, *liṅga*—indicate. They are a primordial pair, a couple who had been uncoupled so far. Once this is reached, we end with a kind of paradise:

Everything seen is holy
 everything heard is a lesson in the ultimate
 everything is touched by the Wish-Fulfilling Stone
 everyone in conversation is a free spirit

wherever one moves, the world is pure
 wherever one steps on earth is a pilgrim place
 all the waters one touches are streams of the holy
 and anyone who surrenders to you in *bhakti* is freed at once.

O lord of caves
 there is no way to compare
 the way you move. (78)

This piece implicitly uses the same form, “A but without the usual feature f:” the world which is full of negative qualities (f) is now not so—“Everything usually is not holy, but now it is; hardly anyone converses with a free spirit, but now everyone does, etc.”

I said earlier that *nirguṇa* poets rather than *sagūṇa* poets characteristically use this riddling language. Both kinds of religious poets are faced with self-contradictions. If the attitude is entirely *sagūṇa*, the poetry is not religious; it has to include the *nirguṇa*, the transcendent, neither/nor, both/and aspect of divinity, that which both fills the world and stands “ten fingers” beyond it. Without this tension, one can have poetry, but not religious poetry. The *sagūṇa* saints, being religious poets, always celebrate the *sagūṇa* but suggest *nirguṇa*, often explicitly, sometimes in the epithets. Here is a poem of Nammālvār on language:

You are what they said
 in the Good Old Books:
 “Than this
 there is nothing more subtle.”

You are that form
 and that formlessness
 everlasting
 you wear lotus and basil
 on your chest
 and whenever we say
 whatever we can
 it becomes you
 however we say it⁸

Compare this with Allama’s statements about language:

No foothold for feeling [*bhāva*],
 words are left behind.
 No space for language, no end to space,
 when the sound of the word
 Guheswara
 explodes.

Words ruin action,
 action ruins words.
 All the dregs of feeling
 vanish, ashamed of themselves.

Awareness of the Lord of Caves
is barren, utterly barren.⁹

Nirguṇa poets like Allama can celebrate the lord without qualities all they want as religious persons, but as poets they have to have images, language, the world of *guṇas* or qualities, all of which the concept of *nirguṇa* denies and rejects. Thus they have, as poets, to use the very elements they reject as mystics. A prayer attributed to Śaṅkara sums up the dilemma:

O lord, forgive me my three human sins:
you are everywhere, yet I worship you here;
you are without form, yet I worship you
in these, and these other forms;
you need no praise, yet I offer you
this prayer.
Lord, forgive me my three sins.

The rejection of all structures that allow ordinary cognition, including language, is explicit in Allama. We must remember, however, that the poems are placed by the tradition in a rough scheme of the religious man's or woman's ascent, usually in six steps (*ṣaṣṭhala sopāna*). Through these six stages,¹⁰ the aspirant's attitudes change. The body, the senses, and the phenomenal world (as we have seen in previously cited examples) change their status in the eyes of the saint-poet. So what one gets is not a system of constants but an ascent or progression (or regression, if you wish) of view-points, perspectives toward the same objects experienced earlier at different stages—like the pattern of trees in Proust viewed by the narrator's moving eye. Here are two poems, brought together at the start of the *Śūnyasampādane*, a thirteenth-century text that orders the *vacanas* in a fictitious narrative:

Like a spark in the stone,
a reflection in the water,
a tree in the seed,
silence in sound [*śabda*, also word]
O Lord of Caves,
is the connection
between you and your men.

Look what happens to the metaphors in the next poem. If you have naively accepted the above traditional images for god in the devotee, he jolts you by questioning that acceptance:

What, can a spark in a stone
burn anything?
Can a tree in a seed
rustle in the wind?
It does not show nor shine forth,
this stance of the Lord of Caves.
Only someone who has enjoyed It
knows It.

Both the metaphor and the questioning of the metaphor are part of the repertoire. They are part of a sequence of stages, though sometimes they can occur in the same poem, as in the poem that we cited earlier:

Looking for your light,
I went out:
 it was like the sudden dawn
 of a million million suns,
 a ganglion of lightnings
 for my wonder.
O Lord of Caves,
if you are light,
there can be no metaphor.

The poet begins by attempting a metaphor (the “dawn of a million million suns”) and then cancels it, questioning even the act of metaphor-making. *Upamisu*, “to metaphor,” is one of Allama’s favorite verbs.

3.

Before I close I want to look at a few poems in detail. I have been groping for a way of reading these poems as poems, not merely as riddles.

Poem S.10 gives us a metaphor where what is metaphored is not clear. It is a form of *samāsokti*, where we are given the vehicle but the tenor is obscure: dreams are a good example of *samāsoktis*. Metaphoric riddles begin as *samāsoktis* except that the answers return them to ordinary metaphors (as dream interpretation does, too, though it may use the logic of other tropes like metonymy also). Such a restoration to unambiguous normalcy and culturally acceptable “common sense” is characteristic of riddles (as a folk genre). But Allama’s poems are not like that, though commentators treat them as ordinary riddles with glosses and answers.

Look, girls, look at the dog fight
 when the world’s body falls dead.
Look, girls, how they wrangle, the dogs
come to feast on the carcass of the world,
and as the dogs wrangle, look
how the carcass laughs at them!
For, don’t you see, the liṅga
 called the Lord of Caves
is just not there!¹¹

I couldn’t find a commentary on this piece, but it is placed by L. Basavaraju, the editor, in *samsāra-heya-sithala*, that is, the stage where worldly life is seen as despicable—hence the wrangle probably of relatives over the dead, and the dead suddenly turning around and having the last laugh. The glossary of esoteric or *bhḍagīna* terms

says that dog = the senses, which makes us interpret the poem thus: look how the senses fight over the world's body, which is dead because the Lord of Caves isn't present there. This clearly opposes *samsāra* (worldly life) to the Lord, very much the opposite of what a *saguna* poet like Nammālvār would say.

The next poem repeats the image and makes it explicitly a riddle, ending with the riddle challenge, "Tell me, Lord of the Caves, what's this wonder?"

I saw the monkey
fondle the fallen elephant's carcass.
I saw the forest,
a prostitute enticing customers
and taking their money.
In the deserted ghost-town
I saw a dog fight.

Now tell me, Lord of Caves,
what's this wonder?

The commentary says, "the monkey is the mind which is attached to the dead body of the ego [*ahaṅkāra*]. In the forest of life, illusion [*māyā*] is deluding people. In the village of the five elements [*pañca-bhūta-dehagrāma*] the dogs, which are the senses, are busy creating conflicts."

Now we find certain constants (both within and outside the poems) are getting established: monkey = mind, dogs = senses, carcass = worldly life of the ego.

Yet one cannot help feeling that this kind of conversion table, which exchanges poetry for allegory, image into meaning and the metaphoric into the literal, while it demystifies and "finds the answer to the riddle," leaves one unhappy and cheated. The poem's work has been undone: the poet's alchemy has turned idea into poetic event and image, and the commentator has turned an experiential event into the common coin of a cultural commonplace. Why would the poet who knows quite well all the abstract words use these images to say the same things in roundabout ways? We know that Allama has hundreds of perfectly clear poems. Then why this *bēḍagu*, this fancy talk?

If we treat it as a poem, we see, first of all, three images of a deserted town (which is mentioned last, dramatically), as if after a war or a famine. Only a monkey, a prostitute, and some wayfarers and dogs are left behind. Still, they are plying their trade, indifferent to the (royal?) elephant's death, the absence of quarters for the prostitute, and inhabitants in a town. Worldly existence seems to be like that: we are these desperate practitioners of their normal behavior blindly continuing even in abnormal circumstances—all seen and described from the outside, to the lord of the caves, to whom the ironic wondering question is addressed by the questing pilgrim-passerby.

This experiential reading doesn't quite cancel the commentary's abstractions, but gives them flesh and maybe even blood. The answer, I'd suggest, is not in the point-to-point identification of elements (dog = senses, etc.), though that may be by now part of the set of culturally given associations, but the way they add up to a wondering question or a questioning wonder, a description which once experienced is its own answer. Once experienced, the images become metaphors, if you wish, for an

attitude; they constitute a way of looking at things and wondering at them, without ever fully undoing the elements. This standing outside of things, this dialogue between two outsiders (the poet and the god who's beyond it all), which as listeners we overhear—from this arises the *adbhuta* or wonderment, a mystery that doesn't exclude compassion or despair, about how people (and, by implication, we) could be like this. Such, I suggest, is one of the effects of the poem.

Or take poem 16:¹²

A new parrot was born in the sky
and made herself a gorgeous house.

One parrot became twenty-five parrots,
Brahmā became her cage,
Vishnu her bird-feed,
Rudra her perch.

And when she devoured
right in front of them
a baby

all that's seen and all that's heard
vanished: how come, O Lord of Caves?

The commentary says unambiguously: in the final stage of the soul's ego-state, life's parrot is born and settles in the world. It is made of twenty-five elements. Brahmā stands for the gross body (*Brahmā* = *rajas*) which is its dwelling; the subtle body (*Vishṇu* = *sattva*) with its sensory elements provides its food; *Rudra* (= *tamas*), the causal body or *kāraṇa-tanu* becomes its base. Because the three principles are devoured by the ego state, it cannot see anything and cannot identify anything by name.

Again, let us attend to the wonder and drama of it: the parrot out of an empty sky, becoming twenty-five, with the three great gods enlisted one by one for her props, and suddenly the violence (O Lord of Caves, these poems are violent!) of cannibalizing one of her creations, one of her own chicks—at which point the world of perception and the naming language that accompanies it are gone. This is the drama of the evolving self.

If we take the parrot as the original creative self that organizes the world, including the gods themselves, for its own use, when that self begins to eat one of its own creations, the object world (which includes names) around it vanishes. It is completely self-enclosed. The *nirguṇa* poet's satiric use of the three great gods of the pantheon as mere convenient props should be noted. Here, too, the poet, unlike other *bhakti* poets, is not personally involved, nor is the god. They are spectators, and make us spectators of ourselves—which we were not at the beginning of the poem. But it is not the abstractions, which may be the scaffolding of the poem, that we train upon ourselves, but the irony, satire, teasing play, and concrete power of a well-worked image (which we first enjoy as if it were a science fiction parrot). That is part of the drama, the reversal, the peripeteia that is both in the poem and in us, the listeners. If we don't recognize this shift or "transformation of consciousness," as David Shulman would say, we will have converted the poem into a mere riddle with one given answer.

Even in a riddle, the experience of bafflement, the seeing of connections between the metaphor and the object, leaves its traces and appeals to our sense of wonder or *adbhuta*—but, I submit, it returns us via the scenic route to where we were. An Allama poem moves you out of where you were. Not the restoration of cultural categories, but their displacement, the derangement of your normal states, is one of its functions—often achieved by its climax of violent images.

As we read enough of them, we acquire (with or without an explicit concordance) a repertoire of images with some sense of what they signify, of the family of special vocabularies they belong to (like yogic physiology); but we still have to read the poems, distinguishing them from their materials. For the poems play on materials as on an instrument, producing tones of irony, sequencing them toward a melodic drama that ultimately takes place within us. Derangement in a well-arranged world, mystification, the feeling of not knowing in people who know it all—such is the effect of the *bēḍagu* poem.

The riddle, as a folk genre, also plays with cultural categories; but, with the answer, it returns you to the well-ordered world of commonplaces. A riddle without an answer is not complete. In an Allama poem, not being able to answer is the answer; not having a language is the language; the clarity is in the mystery. It is like a mathematical proof that proves that a problem cannot be answered, that certain theorems are incapable of proof.

Notes

1. Ramanujan 1973.
2. For his life and a selection from his poems see *ibid.*, 143–168.
3. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
4. Jakobson 1987.
5. Nandimath et al. 1965: 82 (verse 33).
6. *Ibid.*, 106–107 (verse 60).
7. *Ibid.*, 101–102 (verse 53).
8. See Ramanujan 1981: 131–132.
9. Bhoosnurmath and Menezes 1968: 2:38.
10. Described in Ramanujan 1973: 168–174.
11. Nandimath et al. 1965: 63 (verse 10).
12. *Ibid.*, 67–68 (verse 16).

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Texture and Authority: Telugu Riddles and Enigmas

VELCHERU NARAYANA RAO

Familiarity with the language becomes more important
the higher the stylization of a folklore genre.

—Elli Kōngās-Maranda.

Pōḍupukatha

This chapter is about Telugu riddles; the data comes from Telugu sources from the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. In Telugu there are several native forms that correspond to the riddle. One of them—the closest to what folklorists call a true riddle—is *pōḍupukatha*.¹ As in other cultures, it is used in a contest between two individuals. You hit (*pōḍucu*) your opponent with a riddle which he/she has to resolve (*viṭṭu*, “untie”). The participants are often young, aged ten to twelve, and the riddling sessions, if so they can be called (since they are not consciously organized), are almost exclusively theirs; no adults participate. Adults do have an interest in riddles, but they do not actively show it in a competitive context for fear of being considered childish. Adult interest in riddles of a different kind will be discussed later in this chapter.

Here is a riddle I heard, or rather overheard, from a young boy at a friend’s family that I was visiting in Hyderabad:

veṅkayya pantulu gāḍu
vāḍi muḍḍiki mūrēḍu tāḍu
*vāḍu lepote vūrēlla pāḍu*²

This fellow Veṅkayya
has a cubit of string on his ass.
The village is dirty without him.

Some of the young kids giggle. The riddle respectfully gives Veṅkayya a title, *pantulu*—brahmin/teacher/respectable person—but adds an irreverent, insulting suffix, *gāḍu*. And the rhyme includes the mildly obscene term *muḍḍi*, “ass.” The texture brings a certain sense of covert satisfaction at the liberty of using objectionable

words with impunity. But apparently the riddle is not new. Some of the young people have already heard it. One of them yells, mischievously: “I know,” and he offers an answer: “the scavenger.” No, the answer is not acceptable. Why not? The scavenger has a string on his loins, which resembles a G-string, and he is the one who cleans all the dirt from the village. Another child says: “the crow.” That is not acceptable either. The crow does have a tail and does eat refuse and thus, one might say, makes the village clean. But the real answer is “broom,” a bunch of stalks of straw tied with a string. The boy accepts this solution: he had not known the answer before, and was just trying to bluff his way.

You wonder if the accepted answer is logical. It is and it isn’t. It is logical because “broom” fulfills the conditions of the riddle; but the other, equally logical, answers are rejected. The only way you can resolve the riddle correctly is by being informed in advance what the accepted answer is. In other words, you cannot logically arrive at the answer, though the accepted answer does make sense.

The riddlers know the rules of the game; when they do not know the answer, they may try a clever solution—but they are willing to accept defeat. Akundy Anand, today a trained folklorist, reports that as a child in eighth grade he was posed the following (rather lyrical) riddle:

nallaṭi ceṭṭalo tēllaṭi dāri
ā dāriḷo nallaṭi dēyyam vēḷṭondi

A white path through dark trees,
 a dark ghost is walking through it.

The accepted answer was “head-lice.” When Anand suggested “comb,” his answer was rejected.

Here are some more riddles of this kind:

*tokaleni piṭṭa tombahi āmaḍa potundi*³

A bird without tail flies ninety miles.—(letter)

kiṭakiṭa talupulu
kiṭāri talupulu
ēppuḍu mūsina
*cappuḍu kāvu*⁴

Tight doors
 Cute doors
 Close them any time
 They make no noise.—(eyelids)

According to Wittgenstein the riddle does not exist.⁵ If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it. For Telugu people, too, a riddle has an answer. But that in itself does not prevent it from being a riddle. What makes it a riddle is that among the potential answers, the correct one is not known to you unless you are initiated into the community of riddlers. Much effort has been devoted to studying the structure of the riddle and the logic of its answer. It is even argued that the riddle sharpens the logical skills of young people. Thus, Elias Lönnrot wrote “As mathematics is in the school of the learned, so is the riddle in the home school of the folk.

Both exercise the mind to understand the unknown, starting with the known conditions.”⁶ We might agree that riddles do, perhaps, exercise the mind—though some forms of riddles do so better than others, especially scholarly riddles. These are not, however, *pōdupukathalu*. There are other names for them: trick questions (*cikku praśnalu*), problem-questions (*samasyalu*), hidden questions (*prahelikalu*), and so on. What folklorists call “true riddles” do more than offer mental exercise; they present a situation where there are several logically correct answers, only one of which can be accepted. As E. Kōngās-Maranda says, “The relationship between the riddle question and the acceptable or accepted answers has not been studied enough.”⁷

Most studies of this question focus on semantic analysis, as in the case of Ben-Amos: “The diverse answers to a riddle, unrelated as they might appear, constitute the semantic set of a riddle.”⁸ Though this may be true, we still have no dependable way of determining which one of several possible answers is the accepted one. The Telugu example suggests that it is the accepted answer that makes the riddle a riddle. An outsider to the cultural knowledge which produced the riddle will have no way of knowing it. Sometimes, it is true, contesting groups may argue about the correct answer. I have witnessed several riddle sessions where disputes about a contested answer were not resolved logically but ended either with the cooption of the contesting individual by the group that held the “correct” answer or with a complete parting of the ways.

Riddles make communities of people who share common knowledge. In this they resemble conversion through initiation. The age group of ten- to twelve-year-olds constitutes such a community, which shares a special body of knowledge exclusive to its members.

An examination of a large corpus of riddles published by several collectors in Telugu brings out additional features. Most riddles have a poetic quality to them. They are structured metrically, often with some kind of rhyme. The style of the riddles, the language used, is irreverent and often obscene. Even when they are not explicitly pornographic, their texture and diction have a coarse and disrespectful tone. I am referring not only to the overtly obscene meanings found in many riddles, which vanish like fog the moment the correct answer is given. Even when the surface meaning is not obscene, the choice of words tends to be crude, as in the riddle about the broom given above. Here are several examples of overt obscenity:

ōttōtti pēṭṭaṅga
ōyi ōyi anaṅga
cālu cālu anaṅga
santoṣa paḍaṅga

Pressing pressing pushing
 saying *oyi oyi*
 saying enough enough
 feeling very happy.⁹

The diction, the style and the tone of the riddle point to sexual intercourse, while the answer is fixing bangles on a woman’s hand. This was a common sight in premodern Andhra: a male bangle seller brought bangles to the house; he sized up a woman’s hand by holding it, chose the right size bangles, and pressed her hand tightly to slide

the bangle onto her wrist. The woman often felt the pain of squeezing as he slid the bangle on. This rather painful experience led to a happy ending, with the woman pleased with her new bangles.

Similarly:

kāḷḷu paṅgabēṭṭi kāma cetulapaṭṭi
pōkka sūti cūci poṭu pōḍici
potuk'ōkka pilla nīṭugā dīyarā
*dīni bhāvamemi tirumaleśa?*¹⁰

Widen [your] thighs and hold the shaft
 aim at the hole and hit it
 take out a child each time you hit
 What does this mean, Lord of the Tirumala hill?

The answer to the riddle is the potter, who works on his wheel by rotating it with a stick. Again the texture of the riddle, its diction and style, indicate a pornographic surface meaning. The riddle is composed in a meter used in literary texts, with the last line borrowed from literary riddle verses.

Handelman, commenting on a suggestion by Ramanujan, says, “Riddles are not indexical, for their structures are directed to answers and not to meaning . . . [They] are concerned primarily with effect (i.e., answers) rather than affect (i.e., meaning).”¹¹ However, a look at the texture of adolescent riddles, as well as some adult riddles, in Telugu suggests that they may also have an affective role to play. After examining a large corpus of Telugu riddles, I conclude that riddle as a genre is irreverent in style and culturally defiant in attitude. Scholarly riddle collectors in early twentieth-century India either cleaned up some of the obscenities or simply excluded whatever was too objectionable.¹² A recent study of Telugu riddles by Kasirēḍḍi Veṅkaṭa Rēḍḍi includes a number of overtly pornographic riddles, but avoids commenting on their texture by giving them the respectable aesthetic label *śṛṅgāra* (erotic), one of the nine *rasas* or sentiments of classical Sanskrit aesthetics. Literary riddles—a different genre—generally have a less objectionable texture, though even a little obscenity often appears there as well (especially in the literary *samasyas*).

Adolescents as a group are located on the boundary between adulthood and childhood. Adults treat them as children, while they think of themselves as adults. As children they are discouraged from using proverbs, which are clearly demarcated as an adult genre. Proverbs are strictly hierarchical in use. Even among adults, persons of lower status do not generally use proverbs, unless the one chosen reinforces humility before persons of higher status. Boys and girls are discouraged from using proverbs. By and large, proverbs maintain the status quo.¹³ Riddles, by way of contrast, question the established cognitive order.¹⁴

There seems to be a certain pride these young people take in being free to violate family conventions in the context of a riddle. This process appears to have two aspects. The adolescents are defeating the adults and their rules. Often an adult may not even be able to answer the riddle if confronted with a group of adolescents playing with this form. Adults are visibly embarrassed because they see only the surface obscenity of the riddle. By the time the answer is supplied, the adult's embarrassment is doubled because of his inability to answer the riddle himself. This gives the

adolescents an opportunity to make their own communities distinct from, and in some sense superior to, those of the adults. If there is a sufficiently large group of adolescents who know the answers to the riddles, they form a riddle gang ready for battle with other adolescents uninitiated into the world of correct responses. Perhaps riddles offer adolescents a particular kind of opportunity in a world that does not entirely accept them as individuals.

Riddles are generally thought to be the property of the young, as has been repeatedly stated by editors of riddle collections. But Kasirēḍḍi Venkaṭa Rēḍḍi reports several intriguing instances where riddles are used in villages by adult men and women both at work and at leisure. His ethnography is often unclear, inadequate, and faulty. It is difficult to see from his book whether he is recording a riddle performance from a real occurrence, remembering it from his past experience, or just imagining a possible event and writing it up. Despite these defects, the riddle texts he presents are compelling even if we discount the contexts he describes. Here is an example. An old man sitting at the public place at the center of the village is accosted by a younger man who “hits” him with a riddle:

tātā tātā tai bōmmalāṭa
bāṭalunnādi baṅgāru mūṭa
mūṭa muṭṭicci muḍigaṭṭu tātā
*tātā tai bōmmalāṭa*¹⁵

Grandpa, grandpa, play of dolls
 A heap of gold lies on the path
 touch it, pick it, tuck it into your bag
 O grandpa, grandpa, play of dolls.

The old man misidentifies the answer as a bag village men carry, containing a flint stone, a piece of steel, and a piece of cotton rope for making fire to light up their cigars. The young man ridicules the old man for his inability to resolve the riddle and supplies the answer: feces—a valuable manure. Farmers gather them, pack them in a bag, and put them in their fields. (The first line and the last line of this rhyming riddle are formulaic.) The old man laughs it off: “Every farmer does that, doesn’t he?”

Kasirēḍḍi Venkaṭa Rēḍḍi also offers the following, from adult use:

situku situku maṭṭēlu vēṭṭuka
mañcinīḷla bāyikotē
kōntēmuṇḍakōḍukōcci
*kōṅgu vaṭṭi guṇḷjē*¹⁶

Rings jingling on my toes
 I was going to the water well
 A naughty bastard came
 and pulled the end of my saree.

Answer: thorny *regu* bush (that grows on the edges of farm land).

And one more:

dēbbhai rūpayilu vēṭṭi
ḍibbila raika dēstē
ēnnu vagili
*sannu ganocce*¹⁷

I spent seventy rupees and
bought this blouse of beads
It ripped on the back
and the breast is exposed

Answer: *sītāphalam*, a fruit which cracks open when it is ripe to reveal its meaty interior.

According to Kasirēḍḍi Veṅkaṭa Rēḍḍi, the above two riddles are used exclusively by village women working in the fields.

Other Riddle Forms

Other forms of riddles have separate names: they are not *pōḍupukathalu*. One such genre is a trick question that tests a person's intelligence. These questions occur in folktales and legends. Often there is a king in search of a minister, or a beautiful maid looking for a suitable husband. Here is a legend about Timmarusu, minister of King Krishnadevarāya. The king took a piece of paper with a line drawn across it and sent it around his kingdom with an announcement that anyone who could make the line shorter without erasing any part of it would be chosen as his minister. No one thought it was possible, until a young boy took the paper into his hands and drew a longer line next to it.

There is the story of a young and beautiful woman who made a vow that she would not marry any young man unless he could make three statements about her which she could not controvert. Many tried, but she denied every statement they made about her. Finally a young man came and said:

Your mother is not a barren woman.
You are not ugly.
You are a chaste woman.¹⁸

Unable to deny any of these statements, the woman married the young man.

Literary Riddles

Often listed in the category of riddles, literary riddles test the intellectual skills of adults, their wit and wisdom, and, above all, their ability to play with language. Used in royal courts of medieval Andhra as demonstrations of cultural excellence, there is a variety of forms of literary riddles: they include *śleṣa padyamulu* (punning verses), *citra kavitvamu* (picturesque verses), *garbha kavitvamu* (verses including other verses within them), *camatkāra cāṭuvulu* (riddling verses), and *samasyalu* (tricky statements). Among them, *camatkāra cāṭuvulu* look most like *pōḍupukathalu*. These are verse-riddles composed by known poets and circulated among educated adults as a scholarly pastime. Hundreds of these verses are often included in riddle anthologies. They are always in proper verse form, in chaste literary style, with no crude obscenity or irreverence. These riddles require no more than common sense and a good knowl-

edge of mythology to answer them. In structure, they look like the riddles adolescents use, but they differ from the latter in that they can be solved logically. As Dan Pagis suggests, “The text of the literary riddle, in order to fulfill its social role, must pose a challenge which can be met through reasoning alone and does not require extraneous or esoteric information.”¹⁹ Often the riddle itself includes clues to its answer, which is always singular. Here is an example:

It moves in the sky; but it is not a bird.
It has a tail, but it is not a goat.
It has a rope, but it is no bull.
What is this, Lord of Tirumala Hill?

Answer: Kite

Despite being in a verse form and literary in style, this riddle is almost similar to a *poḍupu katha*. However, there are literary riddles that play complex language games.

<i>rāmuḍēvvāri gūḍi rāvaṇu mardīṇcē</i>	(to ka mū ka to)
<i>paravāsudevuni paṭṇam’ edi</i>	(raṇ ga na ga ram)
<i>rājamannāruce raṇjillu śaram’ edi</i>	(la ko ri ko la)
<i>velaya gānuga vaṇṭi vittadedi</i>	(jam bī ra bī jam)
<i>sītānu cekona cēracina dhanuvedi</i>	(paṇ cā stru cā pam)
<i>sabhavāri navviṇcu jāṇa ēvaḍu</i>	(vi ka ṭa ka vi)
<i>ala rambha kōppulon alaru mālika edi</i>	(man dā ra dā mam)
<i>śrīkrṣṇuḍ’ eyiṇṭa cēlagucuṇḍē</i>	(nan da sa da nam)
<i>annīṭiki jūḍan aidesi yakṣaramulu</i>	
<i>onaran irudesa cadivinān ḍokka tīre</i>	
<i>cēppagalgina nen ittu cinni mada</i>	
<i>cēppalekunna nagudu ne cinni nagavu.</i>	

Who helped Rāma kill Rāvaṇa?
What’s the name of Krishna’s city?
What is the weapon held by Vishnu?
What is the seed that looks like *kānuga* seed?
Which bow was broken to win Sītā?
Who makes people laugh in the court of the king?
Which is the flower-garland in Rambhā’s hair?
Where did Krishna grow up?

All these answers have five syllables each.
You can read them backwards, they will be the same.
If you can tell them, I will give you money.
If not, I will give myself a little smile.

The answers given in parentheses next to each line of the verse indicate that all of them are palindromes (*m* equivalent to the homorganic nasal), carefully crafted to fit the conditions of the answer.

A different kind of literary riddle is *samasya*, which is presented to a poet who wishes to be tested in his skills of extempore versification. *Samasyas* of this kind are presented as a line of an unfinished verse; the poet is supposed to use the line and

compose a verse around it, thereby making the verse meaningful. The following *samasya* was often used to test the skills of poets in *śatāvadhāna* (mnemo-technic) performances. The famous twin poets and extempore versifiers, Tirupati Venkatakavulu, known for their wit and phenomenal skills of memory, completed scores of *samasyas* like this one:

sati sati gavaṅga putra santati galigēn

A woman slept with another woman and gave birth to a son.

On the face of it, the *samasya* is nonsense. The poet's trick is to let the third line of the improvised verse end in a *va-*. Read together, the first word *sati* (woman/wife) of the *samasya* now changes to *vasati* (house). The nonsense *samasya* is rendered sensible by this change and is contextualized by the rest of the verse: a certain young man who had no male children had a new house built in harmony with his astrological signs; he slept with his wife in this new house and she gave birth to a son. *Samasyas* like this are a favorite pastime of poets, who enjoyed being tested for their versifying and problem-solving skills. Often mildly obscene overtones of the *samasya* line disappear when the rest of the verse is elaborated around it.

Literary riddles play with language. It is as if language itself becomes an area of endless playfulness, replete with enigmatic modes, opening up labyrinthine possibilities to explore. Where the answer is logical and undisputable, the process of finding it becomes a game. For the true riddle, the *pōḍupukātha* of adolescents and of adults of nonliterate low castes, where the process of finding the answer is not logical, the answer itself is enigmatic. Here the play is with meaning, not with the language.

Forms similar to the literary riddle are reported from nonliterate traditions, too. One such form is sung in groups of playing or working men and women. The examples I have found are overtly erotic and lead to only one logical answer, which is predictably nonerotic. Here is a woman singing:

I am going, I am going, on my way to *cārkamān*
I gave my feet to one and my hands to another
and now I am going for yet another.

*I gave my feet to the goldsmith, my hands to the banglesmith,
and now I am going for money to pay them.*

I am going I am going
I have one guy on top of me and another under me
and I am going for yet another.

*I have bōṭṭu on my forehead, betel on my teeth,
and I am going to find a mirror.*

I am going I am going
I hid one and killed the other
and one more I have fanned with my saree.

*I covered the pot and put out the fire
I blew out the lamp with the breeze from my saree²⁰*

The first part of each of the segments describes what appears to be the behavior of a brazen and promiscuous woman. The answer reveals a very ordinary woman busy with her household work. There are several variations on this theme, suggesting that this type of song is a genre by itself, though there is no native name for it.

Riddles with Stories

Sanskrit has a name for riddles with stories: *prahelikā*. Literary Telugu borrows the word, but folk Telugu has no name for this genre, and the available reports suggest that this is also called *pōdupukatha*. However, each of these riddles has a long story to explain it. Here is an example given by Kasirēḍḍi Veṅkaṭa Rēḍḍi:

katalanni ētalayē
kāpural rēṇḍ'aye
ādu sacci ar'nell'āyē
aḍ'esina kundelu iyyāla māpati kūr'ayē
saccina magaḍu saṇḍlamida
*manunna magaḍu maṅcammīda*²¹

Stories are sad
 Two lives, two men
 He died six months ago
 The rabbit he killed
 Is dinner tonight
 The husband who died is on my breast
 The husband I married is in my bed.

A certain woman loved a man. Her parents did not approve of him and got her married to another man. The broken-hearted lover hung himself on a tree in the nearby forest. The woman visited the tree every day and poured water on the feet of the dead body. Gradually a thick shrub of grass grew under his feet, and a rabbit lived in it. In course of time, the rope holding the body—now only a skeleton—fell on the rabbit and killed it. The woman collected the rabbit, made dinner, and served it to her husband.

An extended version of the story adds that the woman skinned the dead body of her lover and made a blouse from it and wore it. A variation on this theme says the husband suspected his wife's relationship with her lover, killed him by hanging him to a tree, had his body skinned, and hung the skin on a peg in his home. The wife, who knew all this, quietly collected the skin and made a blouse from it.

Another instance is built around a Sanskrit verse, not different in tone from any other verse advising good conduct. The story associated with it makes it an enigmatic projection of events that happen later. A certain rich Sanskrit scholar had two sons. At the time of his death, the scholar called his sons and asked them to choose either his texts or his wealth. The elder one chose the wealth, while the younger one chose the texts. One day a prince visited the young man and bought, for a vast sum, a single stanza from his texts. The king was furious with the prince for wasting his money on a stupid Sanskrit stanza. Here is the verse:

*bhojanam bali-bhuktam ca
śayane hasta-mārjanam
paradeśe ca jāgaram
prathamakopanivāraṇam*

Eat after feeding animals.

Sleep after tidying the bed with your hand.

Keep awake in a foreign country.

Avoid impetuous anger.

The king drove his son out of his kingdom; the prince wandered into a nearby city. A courtesan saw him, was taken by his princely appearance, and invited him into her house. But he was not attracted by her, and the rejected courtesan tried to poison him. The prince remembered the verse he had bought and gave the first morsel of his food to a cat passing by. The cat died at once. The prince, realizing the danger he was in, went away without showing anger. Soon another courtesan found him and invited him to her house. The prince was not attracted by this courtesan either. Angered by his rejection, the courtesan made a bed for him over a deep well, carefully covered up. The prince remembered his verse and tidied the bed, firmly pressing it with his hands; it sank into the well. Realizing the treachery of these courtesans, the prince went off to another country—again without showing anger.

The princess of that land suffered from a strange curse: anyone who married her died on the nuptial night. One after another, many princes married her and died; no one knew why. The prince decided he would find the secret of these mysterious deaths. He married her, and on the first night was duly shown into her bedroom. He found his bride deep in sleep. Unable to understand this strange behavior, the prince waited for a while. The room looked rather inhospitable. He remembered he was in a foreign country; the verse he had bought prescribed wakefulness, so he kept awake. Right at the stroke of midnight, two snakes came out of the two nostrils of the princess. The prince swiftly hacked them with his sword. Soon there was a demon who stood before him, about to throttle his neck. The prince cut off the demon's hands. The handless demon ran out of the room and disappeared.

When the princess woke and saw the dead snakes and arms on the floor, her bridegroom consoled her and told her what had happened while she slept. She was relieved to discover that she had been freed from the demon who possessed her. And the prince ruled the kingdom and lived happily with the princess.

Here a seemingly straightforward Sanskrit verse turns out to be proleptically potent, capable of offering protection from unforeseen dangers, hence well worth the enormous investment in acquiring it.

There are ritual parallels to this kind of story. Riddles and riddle-like forms employing tricky or enigmatic language are often used in weddings. The Telugu wedding ritual includes an expressive moment when the new couple enters the bridegroom's home: at the doorway, the young man is asked (mostly by members of his own family) to divulge his bride's name. The bride is similarly asked to state her husband's name. Normally, husbands and wives do not mention the name of their spouse; it is considered immodest to do so. (Originally, perhaps, naming was felt to expose the person to the dangers of black magic.) Here, the bridegroom either boldly mentions his new bride's name or he makes an intriguing, riddle-like statement, the

answer to which would be her name. Thus P. Nāgarāju, a Hyderabad folklorist, reports that he composed the following riddle at his wedding to encode his wife's name—Venkaṭa Nāgarāmarājyalakṣmī: "The political slogan of the Bharatiya Janata Party (= *Ramarāja*) has entered my name (= *Nāgarāju*). The deities of our houses (= *Veṅkaṭa*) united and began the story. At the end I found the goddess of wealth (= *Lakṣmī*)."²²

The Enigma of the Future: A Telugu Nostradamus

There is a genre of songs extensively used by mendicant singers in Andhra called *tattvalu* (philosophical songs), authored by the prophet-poet Potulūri Vīra Brahman. Telugu classification does not see these songs as riddles, but it does consider their language secretive (*mārmika bhāṣa*). That there is something riddle-like in these songs is clearly perceived by both the singers and the listeners. But first let me present the context of these songs.

A group of men, dressed in soiled ochre robes stuck to their perspiring bodies, sit in an open space on the street corner on a hot summer evening. One of them has a beard and matted hair. He holds a lute with one string; several others have cymbals. A pipe of ganja is being passed around, and as each one of them takes a deep puff, the group becomes quieter. A few passers-by watch them from a distance. The man with the lute starts tuning it, and his humming explodes into a song in his loud and clear voice. The people with cymbals follow the last line. They are singing a song popularly known as a Brahman song.

Don't say, I didn't tell you.
 Listen, if you reach the guru and bow to him
 you will live.
 The guru's word never fails.
 The spirits will chew up all those who go the wrong way.
 In youth you fail to know.
 In pride you fail to see.
 You can't say when—now or tomorrow.
 Someday, sometime no one knows but
 you will clearly hear the sounds of his horse's hoofs.
 Don't say I didn't tell you.
 Your mind is filled with foul thoughts
 but you will learn to see if proof is shown.
 Mothers and children will be separated,
 walk in the wilderness eating roots and berries,
 cry like crows and die alone.
 They scream for help and give up their life-breath,
 cry as if an army of demons had attacked them.
 The sky turns red.
 Six religions are mixed up.
 People of the world die by fire and water.
 Don't say I didn't tell you.

They see smoke bellowing from the earth,
 stars in the middle of day.
 The sky makes frightening sounds,
 and people fly like helpless birds.
 Sinners die, but those with merit are saved.
 Those who do not chant 'Rāma Rāma'
 will drop dead, watch out.
 You do not see what will come to pass.
 The guards of Yama will force you to the city of death.
 Don't say I didn't tell you.
 After these strange events
 the golden age of truth will begin.
 Vīrabhogavasantarāyalu will rule with pleasure
 the seven islands, with a single wheel.
 Don't say I didn't tell you.²³

Potulūri Vīra Brahman, believed to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu, foretold the future and promised rebirth of the golden age. Probably belonging to the late eighteenth century, this guru, worshiped by artisan castes in Andhra Pradesh, composed a number of songs (*kīrtanas*) sung by mendicants. These songs present, in enigmatic language, a picture of a deteriorating world and its ultimate doom. According to the chapbooks describing his biography, Vīra Brahman is the ultimate *brahman*, who came to teach the world that the present Brahmins are impostors usurping the position that truly belongs to the Viśvabrāhmaṇas, or artisan castes. Here is a brief summary of his story.

When the wheel of time moves on, and the age of Kali begins—the fourth in the ages of progressive deterioration—human beings fall into bad ways. Dharma grows weak, and people lose their knowledge. Chaste women become rare. The goddess Earth goes to Brahmā and cries: "I cannot bear this burden. Even one sinner is heavier than all the cardinal mountains. Save me." Brahmā asks her to be patient. "The Kali age has hardly begun," he says. "There is still a long way to go. The Mahābhārata war has only recently ended."

King Parikshit comes to rule. Even during his rule, the cow of dharma loses three of her legs and is left standing on one. The evil Kali, taking a low-caste *śūdra* form, kicks her leg. Three-thousand years go by. Harihararāya of Vijayanagar dynasty rules the earth. His dynasty ends, and then come the Muslims. Viṣṇu decides it is time to help the human world: he calls for all the gods, asks Śiva to take birth in a Kṣatriya family in Benares with a human name, Ānandabhairava Yogi. Śiva sends Brahmā to be born in a Viśvabrāhmaṇa (goldsmith) family as Ānanda, while he (Viṣṇu) himself decides to be born in another goldsmith family as Vīra Brahman.

In Nandikōṇḍa monastery, sage Vīrabhojayāchāryulu has no male children. One day, when he is absent from home, a hermit comes to his house. His wife Vīrapāpamāmba receives the hermit, but he refuses the honors because she has no children. When she begs for a blessing, the hermit says that she will not have a child of her own but will receive a male child from a sage. The boy will be no ordinary child, for he is the very avatar of the God. She should go on pilgrimage to look for that child. The couple set off on pilgrimage. Meanwhile another goldsmith couple, Paripūrṇācāryasvāmi and his wife Prakritimāmba, have no children. In response to their prayers, God appears in the wife's dream and says: "I will be born as your child: but your husband will die soon after that." That night, a light enters her womb, and

soon she is pregnant. Nine months later she gives birth to Vīra Brahman. Just before his birth, a star appears on the sky. Ordinary people fear that the star indicates calamities, but sages know that God has been born on the earth to save the world. Soon after, Paripūrṇācāryasvāmī dies. Prakritimāmba then finds a sage to whom she entrusts the child, and she leaves the world in peace. The sage gives the boy to Vīrabhojayācāryulu and Vīrapāpamāmba, who come to see him on their pilgrimage.

Vīra Brahman grows up in their house; one day he teaches divine knowledge to his mother. He shows her his cosmic form and informs her how the goldsmiths lost their ancient status of priesthood to the Brahmins. This is how it has happened:

Vyāsa Deceives His Teacher Viśvakarma

The great author of sacred texts, Vyāsa, serves Viśvakarma, the divine architect, who is born out of Maya, the Viśva-brahma. He studies with him for twelve years with great devotion and learns from him all the *Vedas*, *Vedāṅgas*, *Purāṇas*, and *Itihāsas*. He writes them all down, with one change. He substitutes the word “Brahmins” wherever the word “Viśvabrāhmaṇas” occurs in the original texts. He writes that only Brahmins shall be worshiped, only they shall have the right to perform rituals, and so on. Then he performs penance for long years. When his guru appears and offers to give him his wish, Vyāsa asks that the books he has written, the *Vedas*, the *Vedāṅgas* and all the *Purāṇas*, be regarded as authoritative in the Kali age. The guru, having given his word, realizes his error, but says that is how it shall be for five-thousand years of the Kali age during which time the caste order will deteriorate.

Vīra Brahman Announces that He Will Come as the Savior

At the appropriate time, Vīra Brahman will come as Vīrabhogavasantarāyulu to protect the good people and punish the sinners. Assuring his mother of the future, Vīra Brahman leaves for the village called Hariharapuram, where he performs penance under a tree. Ānandabhairavayogi, the incarnation of Śiva, comes that way hunting animals. He sees a tiger about to kill a cow. Aiming to kill the tiger and save the cow, Ānandabhairavayogi shoots an arrow, which misses its aim and hits the cow instead. Ānanda is distressed that he has unwittingly committed an evil act. He approaches Vīra Brahman, asking for help to get rid of his sin. Vīra Brahman reminds Ānanda that he (Ānanda) is Śiva himself who has taken human birth. But since human life has to be lived, he will suffer the consequences of the sin he committed. For this reason, Ānanda will be reborn in a Muslim family. However, that should not matter: even as a Muslim, Ānanda will retain knowledge of the *brahman* and will rule his people justly.

Vīra Brahman himself goes to another village and serves a woman called Accamma. Every day he takes her cattle out into the field, draws a line around the herd and sits at a distance, writing a book. That book is the famous *Kālaḥjñānam*, the knowledge of time, in which all that is going to happen is foretold.

Kālaḥjñānam is a folk genre; several texts of this genre are reported in Telugu folklore. A Sanskrit *Kālaḥjñānam* is attributed to the sage Vidyāranya, the royal guru of the Vijayanagar dynasty.²⁴ Typically, *Kālaḥjñānam* books describe the events of the past in future tense, including statements that look like predictions.

Every day while Vīra Brahman writes his book, the cattle stay inside the line and yet get enough grass to graze on. Every day Accamma gives him lunch, but Vīra Brahman puts it in a ditch. He also puts the pages of the book he has written in a ditch near Accamma’s house, covering them up with a huge rock. One day some cattle thieves see the herd of well-fed cattle standing alone with no herder around, and try to steal them. When the thieves enter the area inside the line, they become blind. Frightened, they run outside the line, and their eyesight returns. The thieves go to Accamma, confess their dishonest intent, and pray to her

for forgiveness. Accamma realizes that Vīra Brahman is no ordinary cattle herder and seeks his blessing when he returns home.

Vīra Brahman has by now completed his book. He tells Accamma who he is and describes the contents of his book:

Eight-thousand eight-hundred and eight years after the beginning of the Kali age, dharma perishes. The goddess survives only in sacred places. Untruth flourishes. People lose knowledge. They commit all the five deadly sins. Nations fight among themselves. Planets miss their given path. The Ganges loses its purity. Śūdras pretend that they are brahmins. People steal each other's wives. Women marry more than once. Gods lose their power. Mantras lose their efficacy. Brahmins cross oceans and eat meat. Castes get mixed up. Epidemics increase. A widow rules over the people. Sexual desire in women increases, and they mate with any man—father, brother, or son. A woman nine cubits tall will be born on Indrakīlātri mountain; she will behead all sinners. A *śakti* arises from Pālṇāḍu and ruins all the towns and villages. A strange thing will happen in Bangalore: on the second day after the new moon, lightning will hit the city. Following the lightning huge persons will descend onto the earth. They will have feet seven times as big as ours. Three-hundred sixty different new diseases grow. No drugs can cure those diseases. New gurus emerge, a dime a dozen. Atheists flourish. Untouchables become kings. The village Kandimallayapalli grows to be a city six miles long. The Krishna river in Vijayawada swells and submerges the goddess Kanakadurga's temple on the hill: water reaches up to the nose ring of the goddess. A pathway will be built to Tirupati hill. Thieves enter the temple and steal temple property. Mlecchas study Vedas. New theories appear teaching that all men are equal. It will be argued that the only distinction between humans is that of sex. Temple worship will be taken over by low castes. Kings will have to follow people, instead of the other way around. Brahmins sell Vedic learning for money. Vehicles move without the help of cattle. People grow physically so small that they will need a ladder to climb a *vempali* bush.

After revealing these prophecies, Vīra Brahman performs a number of miracles. He takes the Muslim Siddhaya as his chief disciple and teaches him his predictions. Finally he enters *samādhi*, his final resting place, and, promising to return at the right time, directs that his burial place should be sealed with a rock.

Just before he enters his *samādhi*, Vīra Brahman sends Siddhaya away. When Siddhaya returns to find that his guru has entered his final resting place, he mourns the loss and asks his guru to come back to talk to him. Vīra Brahman returns from his *samādhi* and briefly speaks to him. His disciples still believe that he will return as Vīrabhogavasantarāyala to save the world. It is predicted that he will come wielding a sword and riding a horse.

Predictions and prophecies are not uncommon in religious literature. One might view them as riddles—in Vīra Brahman's case, riddles in reverse order. As predictions of events that have not yet happened, they are riddles with answers yet unborn. When Indira Gandhi became prime minister of India, Vīrabrahman's followers found one of his prediction riddles that a widow will rule the country, confirmed.

Riddling of this variety is similar to finding familiar shapes in clouds. As children we found the entire *Mahābhārata* battle in the clouds on the evening sky. It is a certain willingness to see things realized that brings the event to happen. You find what you already have in your mind. But there is a difference. Riddling needs a community. A shared acceptance of a world—a world of letters that look like birds without tails, eyelids that appear like doors that do not make any noise, and so on; a world

believed to have a prior existence, but actually created in the process of riddling—performs a creative trick. It brings a community into existence, while allowing the members of this community to believe that it existed prior to their creating it. A world which the community has not created is not *its* world; and a world which does not exist prior to the community's creation of it is also not a world, for it lacks substance. Riddling performs both tricks: it allows you the freedom to create a reality without interfering with your belief that you have not created it.

Riddling with the future performs a similar task. A feature of all belief in predictions is the conviction that the future exists, already made, only to be revealed in due course. Such a future is actually a “past” veiled by time.

Such a belief needs the authority of a guru who has seen that future before ordinary people have the chance to do so. A firm belief in such an authority requires that the guru perform miracles to prove that he has the power to “see” the future, has lived in the future as well as in the past. Vīra Brahmam's biography does just that. Here is guru who is beyond time and who therefore “knows” time. Vīra Brahmam's biography is thus a part of the whole story, an integral part of the riddle he and his community have created.

Conclusion

We have seen that riddles use irreverent and often obscene language, enigmatizing the world of secure meanings; or, if they are literary riddles, they disturb the comforting solidity of ordinary language and open it up as a world of endless double meanings and miraculous rearrangements of syllables which playfully present themselves to our consciousness. The world of everyday experience, the world ordered by rules and rituals, hierarchies and authority, is ingeniously disturbed and mysteriously reordered. All riddles, and especially true riddles, are open-ended. Their answers are not immediately seen; they are *adr̥ṣṭārthas*, having a resolution beyond our control. This quality of the riddle underlies their location in problem situations in folktales, such as weddings and funerals.

Proverbs, by way of contrast, establish an order, respect authority, and confirm convention. They are perceived as wisdom of the many, the knowledge of the ancients.²⁵ In usage, too, proverbs belong only to the elders, who have the authority to use them. They therefore come to be cited in dispute settlements, or folk courts, where order as perceived by the elders of the community prevails. Riddles are the playful tools of the young, of the illiterate, and of those who test and question one's claims to be eligible. Proverbs establish the order; riddles question it. Proverbs are at the center of community life, in the central space of the village, where adults gather. They flow in one direction—from above to below. Riddles are situated at the peripheries, among adolescents or uneducated men and women, and in the boundary spaces of ritual situations such as choosing a bridegroom or a minister. Riddles operate among equals to form a community, often opposed to higher status communities. Gurus employ riddles to test the readiness of their disciples or to couch truth in a language accessible only to initiates.

Notes

1. Other words for *pōḍupukatha* are: *ōḍḍu katha*, *aḍḍu katha*, *māru katha*, *taṭṭu katha*, and *viḍupu katha*.

2. Recorded from Tarani Teja (age nine years).

3. Reddy: 90. There are a number of printed anthologies of riddles in Telugu. Most of them list the riddles in alphabetical order and give the answers at the end of the book or at the bottom of each page. Almost all of these books are poorly printed and full of errors. They are circulated among barely literate people, suggesting that *pōḍupukatha* is not a genre of educated adults. Scholarly interest in riddles appears to be an early twentieth-century phenomenon. Many literary magazines at that time began publishing riddles, especially literary riddles and trick questions. A very early anthology, probably the earliest in Telugu, was compiled by Nandiraju Chelapati Rao (1910?). Andra Seshagiri Rao, a pioneer in the collection and study of oral texts, listed the following riddle collections in Seshagiri Rao 1984: (1) *Camatkāra Pōḍupukathalu*, Madras, 1936; (2) *Camatkāra Pōḍupukathalu anu 200 Tēlugu Sāmēṭalu*, Rajahmundry, 1951; (3) *Camatkāra Pōḍukathalu*, Vijayawada, 1954; (4) *Camatkāra Pōḍupukathalu*, Tenali, 1955. Nedunūri Gaṅgādharam, a pioneering collector of folk materials, published an anthology, *Pasiḍi Palukulu*, in which he included 135 riddles. A recent study on Telugu riddles is Kasirēḍḍi Veṅkaṭa Rēḍḍi 1990, which includes a number of riddles not published anywhere before.

4. Reddy: 50.

5. Wittgenstein 1961: 148–149.

6. Quoted by Kōngās-Maranda 1976: 127.

7. Ibid., 129. See also Kōngās-Maranda 1971: 193, observing that both parts of the riddle, image and answer, are coded. In this respect, the semantics of Telugu *vippu*, often used for riddles, are similar to the connotations of the corresponding English and Finnish terms. *Vippu* connotes “untying a knot, opening, revealing”; cf. Finnish *arvoitus* < *arpa*, “dice, instrument used in divination”; “riddle,” German *Rätsel*, connoting “advise, counsel, guess, divine.”

8. Ben-Amos 1976: 254.

9. Veṅkaṭa Rēḍḍi 1990: 423.

10. Ibid., 416.

11. See Handelman: this volume.

12. Seshagiri Rao 1984: 37 even admits to having censored objectionable riddle-texts.

13. See Narayana Rao 1981.

14. See Kōngās-Maranda 1976: 136, and also Michael Lieber’s critique of Maranda in the same issue, Lieber 1976: 255–265.

15. Veṅkaṭa Rēḍḍi 1990: 153.

16. Ibid., 159.

17. Ibid., 160.

18. This incident has been used in a 1960s Telugu movie-song: *o rūpavātī nen’ avun’ annadi nuvvu kād’ anagalavā? / ne kād’ annadi nuvv’ avun’ anagalavā? nīvu kurūpivi kādu / kori ninu ganna talli gōḍrālu gādu*. [Thanks to P. Subbachari, folklorist from Hyderabad, for informing me of this song.]

19. See Pagis: this volume.

20. Veṅkaṭa Rēḍḍi 1990: 155. For a similar song, see *ibid.*, 148.

21. Ibid., 289–292.

22. My thanks to Nagaraju for this recollection.

23. From *Kāla-jñāna-tattvamulu*, songs of Potulūri Vīra Brahmam, chapbook, no date.

24. See Wagoner 1993: 165–169.

25. See Mieder and Dundes 1981. See especially Taylor 1981, in that volume. In Telugu proverbs are called *śāstras*, equating them with great prescriptive knowledge handed down by sages in Sanskrit.

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12

Enigmas of Sexual Masquerade in Hindu Myths and Tales

WENDY DONIGER

An enigma is, after all, just a story that we don't understand.¹ Of course we do not understand it in the beginning, but are we even meant to understand it in the end? The *Asya Vāmasya* hymn of the *Rg Veda*,² for example, flaunts its obscurity, boasts of how difficult, nay, how impossible, it is to fathom the secrets of which it hints. More precisely, it presents us with a vivid contrast between those who know and those who do not know the answer to the puzzles. But which side of this great divide are we on?

In the Upaniṣads, Brahmā purposely teaches the demons an “inoperative truth” about the self, and the demons go away without ever knowing the (operative) truth:

To protect Indra and to destroy the demons, Br̥haspati [the guru of the gods] became Śukra [the guru of the demons] and emitted this ignorance, in which what is auspicious is said to be inauspicious, and what is inauspicious is said to be auspicious. [This doctrine] . . . is false. It is like a barren woman whose fruit is limited to mere sexual pleasure. You should shun it as you would shun a woman who has fallen from her virtue. . . . Those who are internally clothed in ignorance, thinking that they are themselves firm in their learning, they wander about being beaten, deluded, like blind men led by a blind man.

The gods and the demons went to Brahmā because they desired the Self. They bowed to him and said, “Sir, we desire the Self. Please tell us.” He thought for a long time and then decided, “These demons have a different sort of a self,” and so he spoke to them about a different self; and so they were deluded and go on living on that, with great attachment to the body, rejecting the raft of salvation and praising what is false. They see what is untrue as true, taken in by the magic that Indra spreads with his net.³

In this story, a masquerade (Br̥haspati as Śukra, a theme further developed in the epics and Purāṇas)⁴ traps the demons (and those demonic humans who follow them) forever⁵ in the role of victims. Another text expands on what happened when the demons were tricked and the gods were not:

Prajāpati said that the one who understands the Self obtains all worlds and all desires. Both the gods and the demons heard this, and the gods sent Indra from among them, while the

demons sent Virocana. Without speaking to each other, the two of them approached Prajāpati and lived as disciples with him for thirty-two years. . . . Prajāpati taught them that the Self that they saw reflected in a mirror or in a pan of water was the true Self. The two of them went forth, satisfied, and Prajāpati thought, “They have not comprehended the Self. Whoever has such a doctrine, whether they be gods or demons, shall perish.” Virocana came to the demons and taught them, “Whoever makes himself happy here on earth obtains both worlds, this world and the world beyond.” Therefore even now here on earth they say of one who does not give [money to Brahmins], who does not believe, and who does not sacrifice, “He is like a demon,” for this is the doctrine of the demons. But Indra was dissatisfied with what he had learned, and he went back to Prajāpati for a hundred and one years and learned the doctrine of the Self, and since the gods had this doctrine they obtained all worlds and all desires.⁶

Thus, in the Upaniṣads, as in the *Rg Veda*, some people do know (the gods, but sometimes even women, or kings, or others outside the Brahmin establishment), and some (the demons, and those of us who are demonic) do not. The riddle that the demons fail to solve is the ultimate riddle, the one that continues to haunt the myths: Who am I? The false answer is given by the mirror, the false image, the double, like the masqueraders in the narratives. The false answer is, like the cliché about stage magicians, “all done with mirrors.” And the great riddler, the great magician, is Indra with his net of illusion, a character whom we shall encounter often in the myths of sexual masquerade.

In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, when Kṛṣṇa plays tricks of illusion, disappearing and reappearing and so forth, Akrūra never sees through Kṛṣṇa’s illusions.⁷ There must always be a person who never finds out the truth, not only because that person represents us, but because God (the ultimate illusionist, the ultimate trickster) is never ever really known. These riddles therefore present us with the intellectual equivalent of the emotional theme of *viraha*, love in separation: just as, in E. M. Forster’s paraphrase, “He neglects to come,”⁸ so, too, God neglects to let us solve the riddle. As the *Brāhmaṇas* remind us, the gods love what is out of sight (*parokṣam*)—that is, out of *our* sight.

Even when we think we have solved the riddle (as the demons do at first in the Upaniṣads), there is a riddle behind the riddle, which we never quite solve (though the gods seem to solve it, at least in the Upaniṣads). Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx, but not the riddle of his own life. The Sphinx seems to operate like those ogres who ask you a riddle and threaten to eat you if you don’t solve it (Vikramāditya and the vampire is the great Indian instance of this genre), or who eat you even if you do solve the riddle. But whose agent was the Sphinx? Oedipus says it was the gods who destroyed him; did they make her ask him the riddle? Are we to understand that he succeeded in solving her riddle, but not their riddle behind her riddle?

Many of the stories from philosophical Hindu narratives such as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* seem to be asking this sort of riddle behind the riddle.⁹ But, unlike the stories in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, in which someone, at least, even if not someone with whom we can identify, seems to know the answers, the stories in the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* seem designed to confuse us and, perhaps, to keep us confused, to shake us up without giving us any answers, to blow our minds, Zen fashion. In this, as in many things, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha* is on the same wavelength as Lewis Carroll, who presents us with the famous riddle-without-an-answer that the Mad Hatter asks in *Alice’s Adventures in*

Wonderland: “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?” Alice struggles in vain to find the nonexistent answer to that one, and, like the woman named Gārgī who tries in vain to solve the Upaniṣadic riddles, she is threatened with having her head fall off.¹⁰

A riddle that seems at first to have an answer is enacted in the many myths of sexual masquerade. The riddle seems to ask as usual, “Who am I?”, and the victim of the masquerade (Jacob, for instance, in Genesis 29) at first gives the wrong answer (“Rachel”) when we know the right answer (“Leah”), until he finally joins us in our correct knowledge (“And behold, it was Leah!”). It is far more often men than women who are tricked in this way, for a number of reasons that will gradually emerge from our brief survey of this theme in Sanskrit literature. So let us first consider a myth about a man who is tricked, and then a myth about a woman who is tricked.

The Masquerading Woman: The Shadow with the Sun

The story of the Sun and the Shadow (Vivasvant, the sun, and Chāyā, the shadow of the sun’s wife) is told *in nuce* in the *Ṛg Veda*, composed in Sanskrit in Northwest India, c. 1000 B.C.E. This is how the *Ṛg Veda* plays with the story:

“Tvaṣṭṛ is giving a wedding for his daughter”; people come together at this news. The mother of Yama, the wedded wife of the great Vivasvant, disappeared. They concealed the immortal woman from mortals. Making a female of-the-same-sort (*savarṇā*), they gave her to Vivasvant. What she became bore the twin equine gods, the Aśvins, and then she abandoned the two sets of twins—Saraṇyū.¹¹

The cryptic form of the text is explained by Maurice Bloomfield’s excellent suggestion that the passage “belongs to the class of Vedic literary endeavors which are styled in the Vedas themselves ‘mystical utterances’ (*brahmodya* or *brahmavadya*); it is a riddle or charade.”¹² He gives as evidence for this the fact that no explanations are given for the hiding away of Saraṇyū, or who it was that bore the Aśvins; instead, a series of hints are given and, at the end, her name—the answer to the riddle in so many folktales about masquerades (such as Rumpelstilskin, or Lohengrin): “Who am I? What is my name?”¹³

As the later Indian tradition attempts to unlock the riddle of Saṃjñā, it draws on many deepseated, often conflicting, ideas about human and divine sexuality and masquerade. There are many retellings of this myth, but for our present purposes a summary of a detailed version from the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* will have to suffice:

Saṃjñā married Vivasvant, the Sun, and bore him a son, Manu; then she bore him twins, Yama, the king of the dead, and his sister, Yamī [or Yamunā]. But she was repelled by the heat of the sun and afraid of his energy/semen [*tejas*]. She looked at her own shadow [Chāyā] and said, “I am going away to my father’s house. Please stay here and be kind to my three children, and do not speak of this to my lord.” The Shadow said, “Even if I am dragged by the hair, even if I am cursed, I will never speak of your intention, O goddess. Go where you wish.”

When Saṃjñā heard what her shadow said, she went to her father’s house and remained there for some time, though he advised her to go back to her husband. Eventually, she took the form of a mare and went away.

Meanwhile, the Sun, thinking that the Shadow was Saṃjñā, begat in her two sons and a daughter. The first son was the equal of the Manu who had been born before, and so he was

called “Manu of the Same Kind” or “Manu Born of the Look-Alike” [*sāvarṇi*]. But the Shadow did not behave as affectionately to the first-born children as Saṃjñā had behaved to them, who were her own children. Manu put up with this in her, but Yama could not bear it. He threatened the shadow Saṃjñā with his foot, and she cursed him: “Since you threaten with your foot the wife of your father, your foot will fall off.” Then Yama and Manu went to their father and Yama said, “Mother shuns us, the older sons, and favors the two younger ones. I lifted my foot toward her, but I did not touch her body with it, and she cursed me. I do not think she can be my mother, for a mother does not behave badly even toward badly behaved sons.” His father said, “It is impossible to make the words of the wife of your father fail to come true, but I will do you a favor, because of my affection toward you. Worms will take flesh from your foot and go to the surface of the earth. Thus her words will come true, and you will be saved.”¹⁴

The enigmatic status of the foot, together with the mutilation that it so vividly describes, is a recurrent theme in this corpus; recall, for example, the Sphinx’s riddle for Oedipus (“What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?”). In Sophocles’ play, as in the story of Yama, the mutilated foot is a synecdoche for the mortality of the body as a whole (like Achilles’ heel); and in the Greek play, as in the Hindu myth, the child is mutilated as a result of having double mothers. The Sanskrit text conceals a pun, for “foot” (*pada*; cognate with Latin *pes*, *pedes*; French *piéd*; and English “foot”) also means a word or a line or measure of poetry (as it does in English), and the trick of the word is what saves Yama’s foot.

Another version of the pun that saves Yama is offered in another retelling of the myth in the same text (the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*):

The wife of the sun, Mārtāṇḍa, was the daughter of Tvaṣṭṛ, named Saṃjñā. He produced in her Manu, called Manu Vaivāsvata, since he was Visvasvant’s son. But when the sun looked at her Saṃjñā used to shut her eyes, and so the sun got angry and spoke sharply to Saṃjñā: “Since you always restrain [*samyamam*] your eyes when you see me, therefore you will bring forth a twin [*yama*] who will restrain [*samyamanam*] creatures.” Then the goddess became agitated by terror, and her gaze flickered; and when he saw that her gaze darted about, he said to her again, “Since now your gaze darts about when you see me, therefore you will bring forth a daughter who will be a river that darts about.” And so because of her husband’s curse Yama and Yamunā were born in her.¹⁵

The riddle here moves (through what Freud might have called upward displacement) from feet to eyes. In many stories about substitute sexual partners, the woman closes her eyes and her child is born blind, as are Dīrghatamas and Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁶ Here an awkward pun on the action of the mother’s eyes turns Yama into the Restrainer (one of his famous epithets), instead of turning him lame—or, as one might expect, blind. The other *Mārkaṇḍeya* passage makes a different connection between Yama’s curse and his eyes: “The second son was Yama because of the curse and had the eye of justice [*dharma*] because of the favor. And because he has the eye of justice he is impartial to friend and foe.”¹⁷ The injured eye here replaces the injured foot in a cluster of motifs that we know also from Oedipus, the man with the swollen foot and blind eye, who could not distinguish his real mother from his stepmother.

The theme of closed eyes is further developed in the *Amar Chitra Katha* version of the story of the Shadow, which is retold from the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*.¹⁸ Sanjna (as she is called here) is warned (by one of the women who dress her for her wed-

ding), "Let me darken your eyes. You will need protection from his glances," and another woman adds, "Glare, you mean." But Sanjna replies, "Need protection from Surya's glances? Me?" But one day, when Surya asked her to "sit beside him," she complains, "My lord! Why do you glare at me so! Lord! I cannot open my eyes." He says, "Sanjna! Look at me! I am your husband! Sanjna! Will you repel me?" "I am sorry, my lord." "Then listen carefully. Since you closed your eyes on me, the sustainer of all living beings, the son you bear now shall be Yama, the god of death." Since the Sanskrit pun is lost here, the curse makes no sense, except through an implicit connection between blindness and death. Here it is perhaps relevant to recall that Yama presides over Hell, and one of the great Hells is called "Blind Darkness" (*andhatāmisra*).¹⁹

The mortality of Yama is closely related to the punning nature of his mother, for the name of the first wife means "the sign" or "the image" or "the name," and the name of the second wife means "the shadow." *Samjñā* is the Signifier. Since the word or name is the double of the thing or person, *Samjñā* is her own double from the start. And perhaps it is relevant to note here that *chāyā* in Sanskrit also means a commentary on a text. Thus if *Samjñā* is the text, *Chāyā* is the commentary; if *Samjñā* is the dream, *Chāyā* is the secondary elaboration. *Samjñā* may also be a camouflage term for *Sandhyā*, a name of the Dawn; the *Doppelgänger* woman is then evening twilight, and the sun has two wives.²⁰ The parallels between *Samjñā* and *Sandhyā* are striking: each is the wife of the sun, ambivalent and incestuous.²¹ Moreover, both of them also designate linguistic symbols: just as "*Samjñā*" means "sign" or "image," so "*Sandhyā*" becomes the term for the "twilight speech" of later Hindi poetry, a speech marked by riddles, inversions, and paradoxes.

The Masquerading Man: Indra with Ahalyā

When a man is the victim of the masquerade, as in the story of the Sun and the Shadow, the text assumes that the man was fooled. The man's sexism (or his nonromantic attitude to the woman as a body rather than a person) may make him regard the woman as a mere object, so that he does not take the trouble to find out who she really is. Sexism dehumanizes, deindividualizes, the other: "In the dark, all cats are grey." (Or, as the commentary on the *Kāmasūtra* 1.1.9 puts it, "Formerly there was adultery, as it is said: Women are all alike, just like cooked rice; therefore one should not get mad at them or get attached to them or delight in them."²²) The masquerade succeeds because the victim of the masquerade, the oppressor of the masquerader, believes that "they are all alike." And it is this attitude on the part of the oppressor that gives the underdog the tool with which to subvert: if you think we all look alike, we can fool you. The weak have to lie and trick because they lack the power to win in a direct confrontation. Women lack the physical power to overcome their male enemies and usually lack the political power to overcome them as well. Thus, our stories tell us, women trick men, outmaneuver them, a fact that may be interpreted from a woman's point of view ("We are forced to trick them, and we can do it") but also from a man's point of view ("Women are dishonest, and always manage to get their way through secret manipulations"). But in those relatively rare instances in

which a woman is the victim, the text asks a different question: Was she really fooled? It is as if the texts assume that since women are always the tricksters, never the victims, any apparent counter-instance must be justified by arguing that the woman was not, in fact, victimized. This is a hotly debated issue throughout the long history of the myth of Amphitryon in the Western tradition, from Plautus to Giraudoux,²³ and it is crucial to a story that occupies an equally central position in the Indian tradition, the myth of Indra and Ahalyā. For some variants imply that, in order to facilitate the divine seduction, Ahalyā pretended not to see through the illusion.

This is one of many stories in which Indra impersonates a human husband in order to gain sexual access to a human woman, assuming the form of a particular sage in order to commit adultery with the sage's wife, a propensity that he shares with Zeus and Wotan, his Indo-European cousins. This epic and Purāṇic Indra is descended from the Indra of the Upaniṣads, who spreads his net of illusion (which is "like a barren woman whose fruit is limited to mere sexual pleasure . . . a woman who has fallen from her virtue") to trap the demons. The most famous of Indra's escapades occurred when he seduced Ahalyā, the wife of the sage Gautama, by taking the form of Gautama. The *Rāmāyaṇa* version of this story accounts for many things, including the origin of woman (for Ahalyā is the Indian Pandora) and the origin of adultery: Indra invented adultery on this occasion and bequeathed it to humankind,²⁴ just as he had bequeathed other evils on other occasions,²⁵ including (indirectly), as we have seen, the demonic heresies.

Let us ask the question most relevant to our concerns: What did Ahalyā know, and when? Many of the manuscripts of the *Rāmāyaṇa* text about the origin of adultery note that she, at least, insisted on her innocence, arguing that Indra took the form of her husband, Gautama, to rape her, and that she was fooled: "She begged Gautama, the great sage, to forgive her, saying, 'I was raped, great sage, by the god who had taken your form, because I did not know [who it was]. I did not do it out of desire, great sage; you should forgive me.'"²⁶ But when the *Rāmāyaṇa* retells the story in the context of the coming of Rāma, Ahalyā is much more deeply implicated:

The thousand-eyed Indra, the husband of Śacī, knowing that Gautama was absent, put on the sage's garments and said to Ahalyā, "Well-made woman, with a beautiful waist, men who want it do not wait for a woman's fertile period. I want to make love with you." Knowing that it was the thousand-eyed god in the garments of the sage, the foolish woman consented, because she was curious about the king of the gods. Then, when her inner heart had gotten what it wanted, she said to the best of the gods, "You have gotten what you wanted, O best of the gods. Now you must go away quickly. Lord of the gods, my lover, you must always protect yourself and me."²⁷

In later retellings, Ahalyā does indeed know that she is committing adultery, and Indra does not even bother to change into the form, or even the wardrobe, of Gautama. In the version narrated in the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (The Ocean of Story), when Ahalyā is caught in flagrante, she manages to dodge the brunt of the curse with a riddle:

Once upon a time, there was a great sage named Gautama who knew the past, present, and future. His wife, Ahalyā, surpassed the celestial nymphs in her beauty. One day, Indra, lusting for her beauty, secretly propositioned her, and she, the idiot [*mūḍhā*], bulling [literally, lusting for the bull like a cow in heat, *vṛṣasyantī*], gave in to the husband of Śacī. But the

sage Gautama, realizing what had happened because of his special powers, came there. Indra, in terror, at that very moment took the form of a cat. Then Gautama asked Ahalyā, “Who is here?” “It’s just the tom-cat,” she replied, in the Prakrit dialect. And in that way, she replied to her husband without deviating from the truth in her actual words. “Truly, it’s your tom-cat,” the sage said, laughing, and he brought down upon her a curse that had a set limit, because she had not deviated from the truth: “Since you behave like a rolling stone [literally, since you have an evil nature, *śīla*], you will become a stone [*śīlā*] for a long time, until Rāma comes into this forest and you see him.”²⁸

In this text, Indra uses his shape-changing powers merely to attempt to get out of the bedroom when he is caught with his pants down. He becomes an animal, and Ahalyā is likened to an animal in heat. But she is an animal gifted with speech. She replies to her husband’s awkward question in a Prakrit dialect, since, being a woman, she is forbidden to speak Sanskrit, but she uses this disability as a weapon, producing an ambiguity that saves her. *Majjāro* (the tom-cat) may be a dialect version of either the Sanskrit *mad-jāro*, meaning “my lover,” or *mārjāro*, meaning “the cat” (from the verb *mṛj*, to wash, because the cat constantly washes itself). “The cat” has supplied alibis in the dark for lovers (and thieves) throughout the world. But since Ahalyā both lied and did not lie, she is given a modified curse, which is, appropriately, another pun.

The Man Who Committed Adultery with His Own Wife

The *Kathāsaritsāgara* is also the source of a striking variant of the enigma of the man who commits adultery with his own wife. This is the last tale told in this long collection of stories, the final section of the story of King Vikramāditya and the Vampire, the ultimate riddle in this great book of riddles. It is told (to King Vikramāditya, the “your majesty” in the last sentence) by a Brahmin named Mūladeva, in the first person:

I went to Pataliputra with my friend Śaśin, to test the cleverness of the people there. I met a young boy who was crying over a bowl of warm rice, and I chided him for his foolishness, but he replied, “You are the fool, not I. I am crying in order to cool my rice and to clear my head of phlegm.” Embarrassed by our own lack of cleverness, we went on. Then we saw a beautiful girl gathering mangoes, and we asked her for some. “Do you want to eat them warm or cool?” she asked. Wishing to understand this mystery, I said to the girl, “Let us eat the warm mangoes now, and afterwards the others, my lovely one.” Thereupon she threw some mangoes on the ground, in the dust. When we had removed the dust by blowing on them with our mouths, we ate them. Then she laughed and said, “First I gave you the warm mangoes, which you must have had to cool with your breath. Now catch these cool ones in your clothes, since you don’t have to cool them with your breath.” And with this she threw some mangoes into the hems of our clothes. We took them and went away from that place, embarrassed. And I said to Śaśin, “I must certainly marry that clever girl. I must pay her back for making such fun of me.”

We found out her father’s house and went there in disguise. He promised to give me whatever I asked if I would stay there for four months, and when, at the end of the four months, I asked him for his daughter he said, “I have been deceived! Well, so be it. What fault can there be, since he is virtuous.” And he gave her to me in the proper way. That night, in the bridal chamber, I laughed and said to my wife, “Do you remember those warm and cool

mangoes?" When she heard that she recognized me, and she smiled and said, "City slickers do trick country hicks just like that." Then I said to her, "I hope you're happy, you city slicker. This country hick is going to abandon you and go far away, I promise you." To which she, too, made a promise: "I swear that you will be bound and brought back by me by means of a son begotten by you." When we had made these mutual vows, she turned her face from me and went to sleep, and I put my own ring on her finger while she slept. Then I went back to my native city, Ujjain, in order to test her cleverness.

When the Brahmin's daughter awoke in the morning she did not see me but she found the ring, with my name on it, and she realized, "He has kept his promise and abandoned me. Well, I will keep my promise, too, and abandon all regrets. His name, on this ring, is Mūladeva, a famous trickster [*dhūrta*]. Everyone says he lives in Ujjain. That's where I'll go." She lied to her father, saying, "My husband has already abandoned me. How can I live without him? So I will go on a pilgrimage, to torment this cursed body." Unwillingly, he gave her his permission.

She went to Ujjain, dressed as a whore, set up an establishment, and became famous there. But she turned away many suitors, including my friend Śaśin, and I became curious and went to see her. I entered and saw my own darling, whom I did not recognize, because she was wearing the clothes of a courtesan. But she recognized me again, and received me like a trickster courtesan. Then I passed the night with her, who was the most beautiful woman in the world, and I became so bound to her by passion that I could not leave the house. She, too, was bound to me through sexual passion, and never left my side until, after some days, the blackness of the tips of her breasts showed that she was pregnant. She then forged a summons from the king, and left me to return to Pataliputra. Though I was in love with her, I did not follow her, because I supposed that she was someone else's dependent.

She gave birth to a son, and when he was twelve years old another boy said to him, "Your father is unknown, for you were begotten by someone or other when your mother was wandering around in foreign lands." The boy, embarrassed, asked his mother, "Mommy! Who is my father, and where is he? Tell me!" And his mother, the Brahmin's daughter, thought for a moment and said to him, "Your father is named Mūladeva. He abandoned me and went to Ujjain." And then she told him the whole story, from the roots. Then the boy said, "Mommy, I will bind him and bring him back, and so I will fulfil your promise."

She told him how to recognize me, and he went to Ujjain and recognized me from the description his mother had given him. Then he stole my bed right out from under me while I was asleep. When I woke up I felt a mixture of embarrassment, laughter, and amazement.

I went to the market place and wandered around, and I saw the boy selling the bed. I asked him, "For what price will you give me this bed?" But he replied, "You can't buy it for money, O crown-jewel of tricksters, but by telling me a marvellous tale never heard before." I said to him, "I will tell you a marvellous tale never heard before. If you understand it and admit that it is true, you may keep the bed. But if you do not, you will be illegitimate and you must give me the bed. Now, listen. Once when there was a famine, a certain king watered the back of the boar's beloved with spray from the chariots of the snakes, and with the grain that grew he put an end to the famine." The boy laughed and said, "The chariots of the snakes are clouds; the boar's beloved is the earth, whom Viṣṇu loved in his incarnation as a boar; the rain from the clouds made grain grow on earth."

And then that boy, who was a trickster, said, "I will tell you a tale never heard before. If you understand it and admit that it is true, I will give you the bed. But if you do not, you will be my slave." I agreed to this, and then the boy trickster said, "Once upon a time, O lord of tricksters, a certain little boy was born here. As soon as he was born, he made the earth tremble by the weight of his foot, and then, when he grew big, he put his foot into another world." I didn't understand what the boy said, and I replied, "This is a lie. There is absolutely no truth

at all in it." Then the boy said to me, "Didn't Viṣṇu, as soon as he was born, take the form of a dwarf and make the earth tremble at the strides of his feet? And then, when he grew big, didn't he put his foot into the world of heaven? So I have conquered you, and you are my slave."

Then he bound me and took me back to his mother in Ujjain. When his mother saw him she said to me, "My husband, today my promise has been fulfilled. You have been bound and brought here by a son begotten by you." And she told the whole story, in front of everyone. Her relatives all congratulated her on having achieved her wish through her own wisdom and on having the stain on the family honor wiped away by her son. And I, having achieved my goal, lived there with my wife and son for a long time, and then returned to Ujjain. So you see, your majesty, there really are in this world women of good family who love their husbands; not all women misbehave always.²⁹

There is a fine symmetry to this story. It is framed by stories about children: one little boy embarrasses Mūladeva in the beginning, and another at the end; the central cryptic utterance is about a little boy, and about growing up. The first set of challenges concerns hot and cold food, and hot and cold emotions: the little boy cools his cooked rice by weeping, and Mūladeva's future wife laughs about cooling warm mangoes. The final set of challenges concerns the foot, in the context of growing bigger, which is to say growing older, a cluster of themes that, as we have seen, characterizes so many of the myths of sexual masquerade.

All of the characters in the story are tricksters. Mūladeva is the paradigmatic trickster, a thief and a magician. Elsewhere in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, in one of the riddle tales of the king and the vampire, he gives the hero a pill to put in his mouth (but not to swallow) which turns him into a woman so that he can gain access to the harem; Mūladeva himself takes another pill that transforms him into an old Brahmin. Once inside the harem, the hero takes the pill out of his mouth, becomes a man, and makes love to his princess.³⁰ Mūladeva himself does not participate in this passionate transformation, but merely facilitates it, remaining on the outside; he manipulates but does not experience. Mūladeva is also said to be the author of the paradoxical "Mūladeva's Verse:" "What man would enter a house that is a chainless prison, where no lovely woman, with full breasts and hips, scans the street (for him)—unless he be of stone?"³¹ In the story of the Brahmin's daughter, Mūladeva himself is precisely that man, who rejects the beautiful woman in his house. He knows all the answers, but he does not know the meaning of any of the answers; he knows how to let another man turn into a woman, but he does not know how a woman can turn into another woman. In this, again, he is like Oedipus, who guessed the Sphinx's riddle by the letter, as it were, but not by the spirit. The word that I have translated as "of stone" is *jada*, which covers a range of meanings including "numb, senseless, inanimate, stupefied," and resonates with the curse that Gautama gives Ahalyā for her excessive sexuality: become a stone. It is also, I think, significant that "Mūladeva's Verse" occurs in the final riddle story of the vampire, a story in which a father marries the daughter while his son marries the mother, a mistake that takes place because the two men mistakenly assume that the woman with large feet is the mother and the woman with small feet is the daughter. This riddle about mixed generations and growing feet is, again, reminiscent of Oedipus.

Mūladeva's son mockingly calls him "the crown jewel of tricksters," but he is out-tricked by his tricky wife (who is described, at one point, through the pun of a "trickster courtesan"—that is, one who pretends to be a courtesan, and also a courtesan who tricks people) and his tricky boy, and, ultimately, by Viṣṇu, the supreme trickster. At various points, they see through one another's tricks. She does not, apparently, recognize him when he lives in the house for four months, but she recognizes him on the wedding night, not by means of vision but by means of speech: through the riddle about mangoes. She merely learns his name from the ring (which is to play a far more important role in Shakespeare's version of the story of Mūladeva, *All's Well That Ends Well*). We never learn her name at all, or her father's or her son's; she is just the Brahmin's daughter. Mūladeva fails to recognize her at the crucial meeting in Ujjain, despite their great intimacy; again, vision fails to identify, but he recognizes her at the end through her deeds and her words: the promise fulfilled.

Mūladeva's son tricks him not merely with words but with the bed, the scene of the crime, an episode that gives a more literal meaning to the term that Shakespearean scholars have coined for the plot of *All's Well*, "the bed trick."³² (One is reminded of a similarly literal bed trick in the *Odyssey*, where Penelope tests the disguised Odysseus by offering to move her/their bed, a bed that they both know is anchored to the ground by a living olive tree, which Odysseus refers to as "a great sign" [*mega sema*], and she recognizes the signs [*sema' anagnousei*].)³³ Since Mūladeva is a famous thief as well as a famous trickster, his son out-steals him before he out-riddles him, applying the old folk tale type of "the Master Thief" (ATh 1525). When the boy steals his bed, the father awakens to find it gone and is filled with the same emotions that he must have expected his wife to experience when she awoke to find him gone: "embarrassment, laughter, and amazement." But in fact it is he, rather than she, who is constantly said to be embarrassed; she is a woman of action, and though her relatives refer at the end to a stain on the family honor, she knows all along that her honor is clean, despite appearances, just as she knows that she is not a whore, despite appearances. Mūladeva grudgingly admits at the end that she is an exception to the general rule of those appearances: not all women misbehave.

The son's active role in capturing his absent father makes this story, from the son's point of view, a variant of the Oedipal (and Homeric) myth of the boy who seeks his true but unknown father (who is usually, though not here, a noble double of the boy's apparently low-born father). What identifies Mūladeva's son as the true son of his father is the cleverness with which he tricks his tricky father. In fact, the son's cleverness identifies him even more as the true son of his mother, the clever woman, the riddler and trickster who uses her head, rather than her body, to trap her man, both at the start of their courtship and in its final resolution.

Women and Riddles

Language and metaphor are the instruments of deception in the mythology of sexual masquerade. Women are riddles throughout this corpus, but they are also riddlers. The riddle is itself a double, often turning on the double meaning of a word or a phrase:

the trick is to find out what the second meaning is, to identify the surrogate—which is also the point of so many of the stories of sexual masquerade. And a trio of French literary critics (François Flahaut, R. Howard Bloch, and Roland Barthes) have very helpful things to tell us about the intersection between verbal and sexual tricks.

Flahaut has commented on the relationship between narrative and sexuality:

Every human being has two umbilical cords: one, made of flesh, is cut at birth; the other, even before conception, weaves a person into language. But not only can this second cord never make up for the cutting of the first, it is itself an ambiguous, or paradoxical, umbilicus: it connects only by keeping apart; it plunges each person into the immense universe of meaning only at the price of an irrevocable break. . . . Fictional narratives are one of the forms of compromise (sexual life is another, and the most basic) which seek to reduce this paradox.³⁴

The paradox of linguistic alienation argues that the original unity of languages (in Eden) was shattered at the time of the tower of Babel; narratives seek to heal that break, when one person tells a story and the other says, “Yes, I understand; that’s my story, too.” But, the deconstructionists argue, we never do understand another person’s story. Similarly, the paradox of sexual separation argues that when the (Lacanian) umbilical cord is cut, we are separated from our mother; sexual union seeks to heal that break, when one person joins physically with another (and so, Genesis tells us, a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they are one flesh). But then the sexual partner may abandon you just as your mother did, or turn out not to be the person you think he or she is.

When these two paradoxes of linguistic and sexual alienation, the tower of Babel and the paradox of sexual separation (from the mother), are simultaneously addressed in narratives about sexual life, the form (the narrative) reinforces the content (the image of the sexual act). In myths about sexual doubles, the two paradoxes converge and attempt to heal one another, as narrative and language themselves may emerge as substitutes for the lost object of love.³⁵ But they may, rather, tear the rift even farther apart, language tearing away at sexuality and sexuality at language.

The myth of the sexual double deals with a subcategory of the more general psychological problem of human identity. We may see these myths in psychological terms, as stories in which intolerable conflict leads to splitting and doubling. One set of stories regards splitting as the solution: the self is unable to accept the identity of some aspect of the personality (Saranyū casting off the Shadow) and so splits it off into another personality: “I am not that person.” But another set of stories regards splitting as the problem: the self does not wish to be regarded as only partial, and wishes to play more roles than those that the partner would allow (the wife wishes to be both the mother and the mistress) and so slips into the role of another personality: “I am both this person and that person.” And many of our stories express both points of view simultaneously. Moreover, the myths also express the sense of our loss of personality identity, a loss that comes from our fear of, or experience of, sexual betrayal. For to the extent that we define ourselves by whom we love and who loves us, to the extent that we take our self-image from the mirrors of the eyes of our beloveds, we lose our sense of our *own* identity when the one with whom we are most intimate turns out to be a stranger, or to have replaced us with someone else. This is another way in which the myth addresses the riddle, “Who am I?” Given the

multiplicity of each of us, the problem is not to explain doubling, but to explain unity. How is it that we are perceived as one, when we are so many?

The truth of sex inheres, in the most literally superficial level, in nakedness: we see one another uncovered. But, as Nietzsche pointed out, nakedness is the best mask, and there are other sorts of truth, more cultural than natural, associated with sex, such as words cried out at the moment of passion, the moment of truth. Indeed, many traditions record the theme of what Sanskrit poetics calls the *nāmaskhalana* (stumbling on the name), the awkward situation that arises when a man calls out the name of one woman when he is making love to another woman. In this case, words betray the truth, while the physical act lies (in implying a monogamous love). The crying out in the act of love, a naked cry that may at first appear to be as primitive as speech acts can be, is nevertheless a cultural fact; the inarticulate coital cries give way to the name, a culturally constructed entity. We have seen the importance of names in the mythology of sexual riddles—names that conceal and reveal the true nature of the masquerader, names given to children in the course of curses on masquerading mothers or fathers, names assumed as half-hints of the truth, names revealed by magic rings, names to be guessed at the cost of life. To this list we must now add the importance of true names blurted out in false beds.

Of course, speech is also an event; the telling of the story is itself an event, which requires to be told. Within the stories themselves, the speech act recurs in opposition to the sexual act and the tongue as a sexual organ in opposition to the eye as a sexual organ. R. Howard Bloch, in *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, notes that, among the many sexual tricks depicted in the medieval French stories, the dirty story itself is the greatest trick of all. People use tricky speech to accomplish their sexual ends; the genitals and the tongue are conflated, and genitals (dismembered and animated) often literally tell tales. As Bloch remarks, “It is not the desiring body that generates the tale which merely reflects it, but the tale which produces desire and which can even be held responsible for the desire for narrative. . . . There can be no difference between the desire so often expressed in sexual terms on the level of the theme and the desire for the story itself.”³⁶ In other words, these are not merely stories about sexual tricks; they are stories about stories. They use dirty sexual tricks to say something about the dirty and deceptive tricks of language. The central event is not necessarily the cuckolding but the clever words that the woman tells to conceal the cuckolding. And the excitement that we experience in hearing the story is an excitement about the language—the desire to hear the story—more than the desire for the sexual act described in the story.

Roland Barthes has provided us with a text and commentary on one of the great sexual masquerades in French literature, Balzac’s “Sarrasine,” in which a Frenchman named Sarrasine falls in love with an Italian *castrato* that he mistakes for a woman. Here is Barthes’s explanation of the use of words in this deception:

Equivocation I: Double Understanding. The tenor says, ‘You have no rival,’ because: (1) you are loved (Sarrasine’s understanding); (2) you are wooing a castrato (understanding of the accomplices and perhaps, already, of the reader). According to the first understanding, there is a snare; according to the second, a revelation. The braid of the two understandings creates an equivocation. And in fact the equivocation results from two voices, received on an equal basis: there is an interference of two lines of destination. Put another way, the double under-

standing, the basis for a play on words, cannot be analyzed in simple terms of signification (two signifieds for one signifier); for that there must be the distinction of two recipients; and if, contrary to what occurs here, both recipients are not given in the story, if the play on words seems to be addressed to one person only (for example, the reader), this person must be imagined as being divided into two subjects, two cultures, two languages, two zones of listening (whence the traditional affinity between puns and ‘folly’ of madness: the Fool, dressed in motley, a divided costume, was once the purveyor of the double understanding).”³⁷

Thus Barthes returns us, in conclusion, to the question of who knows and who does not know, and of the reader’s delicate balance between these shifting worlds.

The theme of “knowing” is particularly crucial to the myths in this corpus. It may well be that because men have given most of our texts their final form those texts speak primarily of a woman being entered and known, and of a man as having (carnal) knowledge of the woman. The man is the knower of the woman-as-field (of knowledge, and of progeneration), and the Hindus speak of the soul as the knower of the body-as-field (*kṣetrajñā*), just as they speak of the legitimate son as the one born in the wife’s body-as-field (*kṣetrajā*). In these texts, the man goes inside the woman’s head as well as inside her body,³⁸ and in this sense he claims to know more about her than she, who cannot enter him, knows about him. But the inadequacy of this formulation is often demonstrated by the very text that makes it in the first place: all that the man learns is a lie. She can conceal a number of things, including her very identity, by virtue of that very passivity that was to give him the advantage in knowing. This asymmetry, or paradox, of the sexual act, which is a source of both truth and lies, is compounded by the asymmetry of public knowledge concerning who is the father (uncertain) or the mother (more certain) of the child, an asymmetry made yet more asymmetrical by the fact that the mother usually knows perfectly well who the father of her child is, though the father may not know what children he has fathered. Moreover, the mother may bear the child in concealment and hand him over to someone else (as happens so often in stories of sexual masquerade), so that she also knows, though the father may not, who the mother is.

These myths seem to ask, “How do you *know* it is your mother (in the case of Oedipus) or your husband (in the case of Ahalyā)?” But the more pertinent question, coded in the story, is perhaps: “How is it that you do not know?” Or: “How is it that you do not know that you do not know?” Or, better: “Who are you who do not know that you do not know?” Or, finally: “How is it that you do not know who you are?”

Notes

1. A. K. Ramanujan suggested this to me in a conversation.
2. *Rg Veda* 1.164; see O’Flaherty 1981: 71.
3. *Maitri Upaniṣad* 7.9–10; see O’Flaherty et al. 1990: 30–31.
4. *Mahābhārata* 1.71–72; *Padma Purāṇa* 1958: 513.201–421. See O’Flaherty 1975: 281–300.

5. The *Bhagavad Gītā*: 16.1–24, in a passage that owes much to the Upaniṣadic text cited here, says it is forever: “The demonic . . . say, ‘The universe has no reality, no firm basis, no lord; it has not come into existence through mutual causation; desire is its only cause—what else?’ Since they insist upon this doctrine, their souls are lost and their wits are feeble; and so they commit horrible actions in their wish to harm and destroy the universe. Immersing themselves in insatiable desire, possessed by hypocrisy, pride, and madness, in their

delusion they grasp at false conceptions and undertake impure enterprises. They are afflicted by countless worries that end only at doomsday. . . . I always throw these hateful, cruel, vile, bad men into the wombs of demons in the course of their rebirths; and when they have fallen into a demonic womb, they are deluded in birth after birth, and they never ever reach me; and so they go the lowest way.”

6. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*: 8.7–8. See O’Flaherty 1976: 73.

7. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.29–41. See O’Flaherty 1984: 181–182.

8. E. M. Forster 1979: 72. The passage reads: “The God refuses to come. I grow humble and say: ‘Do not come to me only. Multiply yourself into a hundred Krishnas, and let one go to each of my hundred companions, but one, O Lord of the Universe, come to me.’ He refuses to come. . . . I say to Him, Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come.”

9. See O’Flaherty 1984.

10. Carroll 1865: chap. 7, “A Mad Tea-Party.” Many people have tried to find answers, including Carroll himself (in a new preface that he wrote for the 1896 edition): “Because it can produce a few notes, though they are very flat; and it is never put with the wrong end in front! This, however, is merely an afterthought; the Riddle, as originally invented, had no answer at all.” Sam Lloyd suggested other answers to the Mad Hatter’s riddle: “Because Poe wrote on both; bills and tales are among their characteristics; because they both stand on their legs, conceal their steels (steals), and ought to be made to shut up.” But more in keeping with the Zen style of the original are the suggestions made by Graham Edwards (“Because there is a ‘B’ in ‘both’”) and A. Cyril Pearson (“because it slopes with a flap”). See Gardner 1960: 95. The threat to Alice comes from the Queen of Hearts: “Off with her head!” The threat to Gārgī comes from Yājñavalkya (in *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*: 3.6): “Do not ask too many questions, or your head will fall off. You are asking too many questions about a divinity about whom further questions cannot be asked. Do not ask too many questions, Gārgī.”

11. *Rg Veda*: 10.17.1–2. For a complete translation of this text and a subsequent Purāṇic version, see O’Flaherty 1975: 56–70. For an analysis, see O’Flaherty 1981: 164–303.

12. Bloomfield 1983: 172.

13. Bloomfield goes on to remark: “The whole, moreover, to our feeling, is pervaded too by an air of playfulness, which cannot be fastened upon any single word or expression, but is felt more keenly after each reading.” Ibid., 174.

14. *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 1890: 103–105. O’Flaherty 1975: 66–70.

15. *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 74.1–7.

16. *Mahābhārata* 1.98–100.

17. *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 105.15–17.

18. “Retold from the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*,” in *Amar Chitra Katha*, edited by Anant Pai, retold by Mayah Balse; No. 58, Bombay, n.d.

19. Doniger and Smith 1991: 4.88 and 197.

20. Lommel 1949: 243–257 for Saṛaṇyū-Saṁjñā.

21. Coomaraswamy 1935.

22. *Kāmasūtra* 1.1.9.

23. See Passage and Mantinband 1974.

24. *Rāmāyaṇa* 7.30.17–36 and verses inserted after 7.30.36.

25. O’Flaherty 1976: chap. 6.

26. *Rāmāyaṇa*, verses inserted after 7.30.36.

27. Ibid., 1.47.15–31.

28. *Kathāsaritsāgara* 17.137–148. Translated in Tawney 1924: 2:46.

29. *Kathāsaritsāgara* 124.131–237. Translated in Tawney 1924: 9:77.

30. *Kathāsaritsāgara* 89 [Vetāla 15]. Translated in Tawney 1924: 7:77ff.

31. *Kathāsaritsāgara* 98.32: *yatra ghanastanajaghanā nāste / mārgāvalokinī kāntā / ajaḍaḥ kas tad anigaḍaṃ pravisāti / gr̥hasaṃjñakaṃ durgam.*
32. Cf. the motif of the talking bed in the story cited in the introduction to this volume.
33. *Odyssey*: 23.173–208.
34. Flahaut 1991: 2:790.
35. I am indebted to Mark Krupnick for this formulation.
36. Bloch 1990: 103, 109.
37. Barthes 1974: 144.
38. For the myth of the sage who goes inside the hunter in the Hindu embodiment of this metaphor, see O'Flaherty 1988: chap. 1.

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IV

CHINESE RIDDLING

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13

Riddle and Enigma in Chinese Civilization

ANDREW H. PLAKS

While outsiders may speak of China and its people as in some sense impenetrable or “inscrutable”—as if to imply that they harbor some sort of dark secrets beneath a placid exterior—apologists, both domestic and foreign, frequently paint an exact opposite picture: of an eminently practical, this-worldly (in a word, “unenigmatic”) culture. Both of these simplistic views obviously fail to do justice to the richness of Chinese social and cultural forms. As in the case of every other living culture, the Chinese tradition, with its virtually unparalleled degree of continuity and self-absorption over a span of three or four millennia, constitutes a dense tapestry of symbolic structures and complex modes of signification. Yet for all that, it is not entirely inaccurate to say that the role of riddle and enigma in Chinese civilization is noticeably less crucial than that in other cultures of South Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean of comparable antiquity.

This is not to say that the Chinese cultural tradition is entirely restricted to a shallow “foreground,” but its more enigmatic elements do tend to be submerged within its predominantly man-centered rationalistic system of thought and values. This tendency becomes visible at a fairly early point in the development of the civilization. With the gradual emergence and consolidation of Confucianism as the dominant intellectual discourse of China’s “axial age,” much of the shadowy underside of the tradition was almost systematically cleaned up or hidden away. Prior to that time the proto-Chinese cultures of the northern heartland—judging by archaeological and literary evidence—exhibited a range of familiar patterns of development (burial mounds, palace architecture, etc.) observed in other second-millennium riverine or maritime civilizations in places like Egypt, Crete, and the Fertile Crescent, suggesting the use of sacred myth and sacrificial cults as instruments of political centralization.¹ But already in the archaic period China begins to diverge from the common model of “hydraulic” social organization, particularly the conception of the ruler as

god-king, or intermediary between the human and divine realms. One small indication of this is seen in what are the earliest examples of proto-Chinese script: the divination texts scratched on tortoise carapaces or cow scapulae, designed to produce cracks when heated by fire that could be “read” as prophetic judgments.² These inscriptions are commonly referred to as “oracle-bone texts” (*chia-ku-wen*), but in actual fact they are not all that “oracular” in content. They consist primarily of straightforward questions on the advisability of a specific course of action, calling for a yes-or-no answer that is a far cry from the riddles associated with a Theban Sphinx, Sybilline or Orphic mysteries, and the like.³

A similar tendency toward rationalistic forms of discourse seems to be behind the demystification of mythical lore in the early classical texts eventually canonized to form the scriptural core of Confucian learning, leaving us with only a few scattered fossils of myth embedded in a thick sediment of pseudo-historical materials. One of the most frequently cited examples of this is the treatment of the “sage-emperors” of earliest antiquity in the *Book of Documents* (*Shu Ching* or *Shang Shu*, also translated as *Book of History*).⁴ In this text a number of stray traces of mythical detail, apparently reflecting original deities or cult figures, have been subjected to a thorough process of what has been called “euhemerization,” turning them into human rulers that are at most culture heroes, and in the simplest sense little more than glorified bureaucratic functionaries in a universal terrestrial hierarchy. Likewise, the canonic collection of early poetry in the *Book of Songs* (*Shih Ching*), especially in the “Court Hymns” section, contains scattered lines with mythological references and even a few pieces of verse narrative on mythical themes; but these are almost entirely divested of cultic or liturgical significance, and, in fact, even these are uniformly “moralized” in later exegesis into ethical exempla within specific historical frames of reference.⁵ Even the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*), the earliest strata of which consist of undisguised oracular judgments derived from divination practice, does not escape this type of “systematization.” Here, too, the unruly pre-rational elements are organized into a comprehensive scheme whose final form functions more as a kind of moral calculus, a compendium of wisdom literature, than as a set of revelations of hidden mystical truths.⁶

This sort of deemphasis of mythical expression and metaphysical speculation was to become the prevailing feature of Confucian philosophical discourse over the following 2,500 years. In the teachings of Confucius himself, as presented in the *Analects*, the Master gives explicit expression to these attitudes in passages reporting his refusal to expound upon the ultimate questions of nature and being, and his advice to his disciples to keep a respectful distance from supernatural phenomena.⁷ With the consolidation of Confucian thought in the Han period, and its adoption as the official ideology of the unified Empire, this rationalistic predisposition came to dominate Chinese intellectual life, as we see in a succession of latter-Han treatises such as Wang Ch’ung’s *Lun heng* or the *Po-hu t’ung*.⁸ The collapse of central authority, and with it the uncontested sway of the Confucian system, at the end of the Han brought forth an intellectual climate more hospitable to the enigmatic side of the human spirit. This was a period marked by the massive influx of Buddhist ideas and practices from India and the rapid occupation by Buddhism of a central position within the Chinese cultural spectrum. With its transcendental metaphysics, its devotional trappings, its

barely fathomable incantations in transcribed Sanskrit syllables, and its emphasis on karmic mysteries and Mahayana salvationism, this religious transformation reopened the gates to the irrational and the enigmatic. Still, even as it was incurring hostility as a supposed negation of Confucian values of family and state order, Buddhism in China was being steadily domesticated, with a solid validation of moral responsibility, karmic accounting, and a variety of other “dispensations” (*fang-pien*) to mortal existence, thus sharply distinguishing it from the more esoteric leanings of its spiritual progenitors in India and offspring in Japan.⁹

The challenge of Buddhism also inspired a resurgence of native strains of speculative thinking, leading to a reformulation of Taoist teachings as represented in a variety of earlier texts such as the *Lao Tzu*, *Chuang Tzu*, and *Lieh Tzu*, to create a new body of quasi-religious writings that came to be referred to as Neo-Taoist “metaphysics” (*hsüan-hsüeh*, 玄學).¹⁰ In spite of the literal meaning of this designation—studies of the occult—here, too, the primary focus remained more on attaining a state of spiritual freedom and spontaneity within the natural world than on penetrating the ultimate secrets of the universe. From this point on, the “Confucian” tradition continued to absorb Buddhist and Taoist elements within a kind of marriage of convenience, by the late-T’ang and Sung periods gradually converging in a new intellectual synthesis that gives heightened attention to metaphysical speculation but remains firmly anchored in a conditional affirmation of the universe of experience. More often than not, this affirmation is tempered by a healthy skepticism, one that holds that the “world” may be unreliable, but the “word” is equally unreliable as a ground of reality. Thus the idea of the world as a riddle to be deciphered, as truth being glimpsed through a glass darkly, never really materializes in traditional Chinese thought. One clear reflection of this can be seen in the area of classical learning, where textual exegesis forms as central an intellectual activity as in other scripture-based civilizations, but remains focused on matters of philology and moral evaluation at the expense of more speculative hermeneutics.¹¹ (This point is probably connected to the non-centrality of metaphor in Chinese literary aesthetics in general, where it has nothing like the privileged position it holds among the Western literary tropes. Where metaphors do occur in Chinese poetry, they are by and large confined to local analogies, rather than sustained allegorical constructions linking surface textual patterns to underlying patterns of meaning.)

I should pause to emphasize here that all of these remarks on the place of enigma in Chinese civilization refer to the intellectual and cultural life of the “great tradition” of the educated elite, primarily Confucian in training if not always in spiritual affinity. In the “little tradition” of popular culture, on the other hand, this rationalistic spirit is counterbalanced by a variety of factors: occult practices, shamanistic rituals, immortality cults, and the like, that provide ample ground for the celebration of the irrational and the mysterious.

The high literary tradition itself, to be sure, is by no means inhospitable to densely polysemous verbal art. But multilayered modes of expression in Chinese writing generally take the form of literati games: virtuoso manipulation of the linguistic medium rather than exercises in spiritual attainment.¹² This does not mean that such wordplay is necessarily frivolous. The “serious” use of cryptic expressions is given special attention in the context of traditional political rhetoric from ancient times down

to the present day, where guarded statements and veiled attacks couched in ambiguous language constitute a major mode of public discourse. A uniquely Chinese form of this is encountered in the “children’s ditties” (*t’ung-yao*, 童謠), a particularly subversive kind of verse riddle that we know from various historical and fictional sources could be deliberately planted on local streets with devastating effect in undermining government authority and inciting rebellion, by instilling a self-fulfilling prophecy of the impending loss of a dynasty’s “heavenly mandate” to rule.¹³

In the remainder of this introduction to Chinese riddles, I will put aside these more consequential examples and focus on less momentous forms of wordplay. The art of the riddle in China covers a wide swath of cultural life, from simple verbal puzzles and drinking games (*chiu-ling*, 酒令) to sophisticated poetic exercises of great intricacy. At the top rung of the hierarchy of Chinese word games stands the practice of composing “lantern riddles” (*teng-mi*, 燈謎) on the fantastically shaped paper lamps hung in homes and streets in observation of the “primal night” festival (*yüan-hsiao chieh*, 元宵節), the traditional climax of the New Year season on the full moon of the first lunar month.¹⁴ These dauntingly difficult riddles contributed to the heady carnival atmosphere in former times, and even today they earn media coverage and public adulation in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan for the most clever posers and solvers.

Reviews of the history of riddles in China, of which there are not a few,¹⁵ customarily begin with a sprinkling of cryptic remarks in a variety of early “historical” texts, such as the *Book of Documents*, the *Tso Chuan* commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Conversations of the States* (*Kuo-yü*), and others, where they are referred to as “hidden expressions” (*sou-tz’u*, 瘦辭 or *yin-yu*, 隱語).¹⁶ The great flowering of philosophical discourse in the “Warring States” period (480–221 B.C.) brought with it a heightened interest in verbal manipulation, ranging from simple puns to sophistic logical paradoxes. The writings of the philosopher Hsün Tzu, for example, contain one riddle in the *fu* form on silkworms, which has no apparent purpose other than as a playful exercise in wit.¹⁷ This humorous tradition was carried forward during the Han Dynasty as the stock-in-trade of clever wordsmiths known as “court wizards” (*fang-shih*, 方士), notably Tung-fang Shuo (154–193 B.C.) and Kuan Lu (3rd century A.D.) who are credited with a number of well-known examples of riddle-mongering.¹⁸ I should also mention here the “Heavenly Questions” (“T’ien-wen”) section of the late Warring-States or early Han poetry collection *Ch’u Tz’u*, associated with the unruly periphery of the ancient Chinese cultural sphere. This text presents a series of stylized queries on mythical lore apparently designed simply to elicit fixed catechistic answers, but also including a few lines that are best taken as conundrums of the “chicken-or-egg” type, as in the following:

Nü-kua [mythical molder of human forms] had a body, but who shaped and fashioned it?¹⁹

It is only by the late Han and Six Dynasties periods (first to sixth centuries), however, that the riddle emerged as a distinct Chinese literary form. The illustrious second-century figure K’ung Jung (153–208), for example, is credited with composing a conundrum on his own name in a form later known as “separating and recombining” (*li-ho*, 離合), and one generation later the controversial prime minister

of the short-lived Shu Kingdom, Chu-ko Liang (181–234), in line with his popular image as an infallible sage advisor, is said to have uttered a number of enigmatic statements.²⁰ Later in the Six Dynasties period, the comprehensive treatise on literary aesthetics *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) by Liu Hsieh (465–522) devoted a brief chapter to the art of riddling, significantly pairing riddles with “witticisms” (*hsieh*, 諧), and specifying that this type of writing was a genre of recent vintage.²¹

As the dynasties rolled on, the genre of the literary riddle took on a more or less fixed form consisting of two parts: an open statement (literally, the “face” of the riddle, *mi-mien*, 謎面) providing the basic “hint,” and an unstated solution (literally, the “bottom” of the riddle, *mi-ti*, 謎底). To this is usually added an extra instruction telling what the puzzler should “shoot at” (*she*, 射) or “hit at” (*ta*, 打), or in some cases, what preliminary components of a solution he may “knock off” (*k’ou*, 扣) as steps toward the final answer.²² The target in question may be a single word (the name of an object, or a proper name), a proverbial expression, or a little- or well-known line from classical poetry or prose. The part that needs to be guessed or elucidated, and conversely the part containing the linguistic trick providing the principal clue, may be lodged in either the “face” or the “bottom” of the riddle. Either way, the game of guessing the riddle requires a considerable amount of cultural information: in the erudite variety, a wide range of literary allusions and associations, classical references, and historical knowledge; in more popular versions, a good foundation in lowbrow trivia.

The specific linguistic tricks upon which Chinese riddles tend to hinge require a bit of further explanation. Some of the devices of Chinese wordplay, such as deliberate inversion of syntax, are familiar in the riddling techniques observed in other traditions represented in this volume; but certain other specific features of the spoken and written language find no exact parallels elsewhere. First, and most obtrusive to the foreign ear, is the monosyllabic shape of the basic lexical units of expression. Chinese is not the only language that tends toward monosyllabic utterances with minimal or zero-degree inflection (English is another), but the extent to which this occurs here is probably unique, even in comparison with theoretically related languages. In actual speech, on the other side of the coin, the use of monosyllabic units is by no means absolute. In fact, the functional units of utterance are more often than not compound terms, reduplicatives, and fixed expressions of three, four, or more characters. But any time we have intensified concentration of language, as in literary expression and especially in self-conscious wordplay, the monosyllabic core comes to the surface. There are two important implications of this linguistic feature for the structure of Chinese riddles. First, the narrow phonetic range of the language, locked into a limited set of possible syllables, makes for an inordinate number of homonyms (only partially offset by the use of tones or compound expressions). This means that potential puns, whether intentional or unintentional, are everywhere—more difficult to avoid than to deliberately fashion. And so, punning turns out to be a less effective device, or at least remains a mark of the least sophisticated kind of verbal dexterity.²³ A second outgrowth of this feature with an immense impact on the development of Chinese literary aesthetics in general, and on the riddle in particular, is the possibility it affords for the matching of words slot by slot in adjacent lines and sen-

tences. This sets the groundwork for a degree of compositional parallelism that goes beyond anything observed in other classical languages, making possible the generation of complex patterns of quasi-parallel and pseudo-parallel constructions.²⁴ In riddles, frequently the essential clue lies in tracing the implications of words in matching slots, just as parallelism provides an indispensable crutch, for want of formal punctuation and grammatical rules, in the deciphering of any difficult Chinese text.

Another language-specific aspect of Chinese verbal art incorporated into riddles, one widely perceived as an exclusive achievement of the civilization, is its characteristic script. Here, too, the Chinese characters, roughly 95 percent of which are composed of phonetic elements plus classifiers far removed from their origins in pictographic and ideographic writing, are not exactly *sui generis*, since most other ancient scripts in West Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean passed through similar stages of development. In China, however, the noninflected nature of the language made the option of a phonetic syllabary or an alphabet of less practical utility, so that this alternative was consistently outweighed by the cultural and sentimental value of the ancestral script. Both the internal construction of the Chinese characters and their cultural baggage as artifacts make them objects of special linguistic consciousness, and hence very fertile ground for playful manipulation. Thus, the great majority of Chinese literary riddles depend on what we might call “visual puns,” in which the written form of a character is broken up into its constituent graphic elements (usually entirely disregarded in normal decoding) and which are then shuffled to form new characters that provide the answer to the puzzle. To give a few simple examples of this game of “character-splitting” (*ch’ai-tzu*, 拆字), let us first look at a very unsophisticated riddle that asks us to guess a single character based on an opening rhyme:

I have four brothers, two are big; one stands upright, three arch over; a pair of mouths is lodged within; so we will not suffer even in famine.

In this case, one need do no more than combine the indicated elements: a “standing man,” three horizontal man-graphs, and two mouth-graphs, to reconstruct the character for “thrift,” answering the final hint of the rhyme (亻+𠂇+𠂇+𠂇+𠂇 = 儉). A more clever example attributed to the proverbial wordmaster Chu-ko Liang presents the clue “eight thousand female demons,” which when recombined “spells” the name of his archrival kingdom, the Wei dynasty (八千女鬼 = 魏).²⁵

As already explained, however, the best Chinese riddles usually require a series of steps of decoding, moving beyond the aural/visual hints built into the written form of the characters in the “face” to draw on complex literary associations in seeking a solution. To begin with an easy example, a game of “one character shoots another” gives us the character for “pine,” from which we are supposed to guess the word “arrow,” simply because we know that in the proverbial list of the “three friends of winter”—pine, bamboo, and plum—the pine comes before the bamboo, and the graphs for “bamboo” and “before” combine to form the character for arrow (竹 + 前 = 箭). Another popular guessing game has us come up with the names of foreign people or places, conventionally spelled out with “dummy” Chinese syllables, on the basis of puns built into the literal meaning of the characters used for transcription. For example, the classical quotation “Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, the son a son” leads us to the name London, since the standard tran-

scription of the English city, Lun-tun (倫敦), would mean something like “cardinal virtues” if read as actual words. Similarly, the expression “the myriad nations come in tribute” provides a clue for guessing Hawaii, whose standard “spelling,” *Hsia-wei-i* (夏威夷) could be read literally as “China casts its sway over the barbarians.” An especially ingenious example of this type uses a slightly bawdy classical allusion, “folding-screen of flesh” (肉屏風), referring to a T’ang Dynasty emperor’s perverse habit of lining his concubines up naked in a row, to hint at the transcription of the country name Israel, whose nonsense syllables can be interpreted facetiously as “a sensual array” (以色列).

As we have seen, the cryptic part of Chinese literary riddles can fall either in the first half, the “face,” or the second half, the “bottom.” In an extreme instance of the former possibility, one riddle gives us only the minimal character (八), meaning “eight,” yet expects us to somehow come up with the names of two historical figures from the Warring-States period. The solution requires special facility in the tricks of the riddle trade. One has to know that the two component strokes of this bare graph can occur in various positions in other characters. One character in which the former mark appears as the first stroke is the surname Pai (白); and one in which the latter is the last as the surname Huang (黃). This, then, gives us enough of a clue to guess the identity of the ancient statesmen Pai Ch’i and Huang Hsieh, whose given names pun on words for “begin” and “conclude.” A good example of the opposite sort is the famous riddle attributed to the late Han scholar Ts’ai Yung, in which a very puzzling “face”—“yellow silk, a young wife, a maternal grandchild, and a pestle for leeks” (黃絹, 幼婦, 外孫, 蘆白)—uses a set of visual and semantic puns. “Yellow silk” equals “colored thread,” whose graphs make up the character “exceptional” (絕); “young wife” can be written “young woman,” whose graphs make up the word “excellent” (少女 = 妙); “maternal grandchild” gives us “daughter’s child” yielding the character “good” (女子 = 好); and “pestle for leeks” can be interpreted as “receptacle for sharp flavor,” which with some imagination may suggest the character for “literary expression” (受辛 = 辭)—all of which leads to the very tame solution: “an exceptional piece of writing.”

Sometimes the visual pun in a complex riddle may involve nonverbal clues. For example, in the following piece the opening line, “Heaven and Earth, a single cast” (乾坤一擲), “shoots at” a one-character answer. The first step in solving the puzzle requires recognizing the philosophical terms for Heaven and Earth as the names of the basic trigrams in the two initial hexagrams in the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*), the former composed of three solid lines, and the latter three broken lines (☰, ☷). By “casting” aside one of the lines in the first trigram, one obtains a single pair of parallel lines, which can then be rotated and combined with the remaining three broken lines to form the character *fei* (非, a term of negation).

With their congenital penchant for categorization, Chinese scholars of the riddle distinguish a number of formal patterns (*ko*, 格), to which they apply various picturesque metaphorical names.²⁶ One such category, known as “rolling up the blinds” (捲簾格), requires reading either the face or the bottom of the riddle backwards to create a new sense of the words given. For example, the opening clue “busy at both ends” (兩頭忙) can lead us to a quotation from the classic text *Ta-hsüeh*: “Human affairs have their conclusions and their beginnings,” if we are clever enough to first

guess its anagram, “occupied from start to finish” (事有始終 = 始終有事), suggested by the initial line. Another set of metaphoric terms speaks of “tying on the bell” or “untying the bell” (繫鈴, 解鈴), the “bell” here referring to a switch to an alternate reading, or a return to the conventional reading, of a key character. In one example of this type, a line from the *Book of Songs* is designated as the target of an initial clue: “delivering grain in the fields” (就場徵糧). Once one sees the trick of substituting an alternate reading of the character *shui* (說 = 稅), homonymous with the word for “taxes,” then it is not too hard to come up with a line from poem number fifty-seven that uses the same reading in a completely different sense.

Several other formal patterns of riddles depend on adding, omitting, or substituting a key word, usually the first or the last word, to produce an entirely new sentence. Names for such categories include “dropping the hat” (落帽), “removing a boot” (脫靴), “up and down the stairs” (上下樓), “shrimp whiskers” (蝦鬚) and “swallow’s tail” (燕尾)—these last two patterns require splitting the first or last character vertically—or “cicada’s head” (螻首) and “dragonfly’s tail” (蜓尾), which split characters horizontally.²⁷ Yet another refinement of this sort is called “brocade screen” (錦屏), a traditional figure for parallel composition. This requires planting in the riddle a very self-conscious play on the idea of parallelism by targeting a poetic line which actually contains one of a set of terms that literally mean “parallel” or “matching” (對, 配, 匹, 偶, 比). For example, the clue, “My soul soars ten thousand leagues” (魂飛萬里) allows the adept puzzler to identify a famous line by the T’ang poet Li Po, “Facing it [the moon], my shadow and I form a party of three” (對影成三人), which meets the requirement since “facing” is a basic term for parallel coordination.²⁸

The more sophisticated literary riddles become, the more complex are their poetic allusions. The following well-known example begins with a famous line from a poem by Tu Fu—“The leaves drift down from trees without end, sighing mournfully as they fall” (無邊落木蕭蕭下)—and instructs us to try to “knock off” a single character.²⁹ The solution depends on an intricate combination of historical knowledge, double meanings, and character-splitting. This involves reading the onomatopoeic term *hsiao-hsiao* for the whistling of the wind and the rustling of leaves in a totally unrelated way: as a doubling of the surname Hsiao, which happens to have been the royal clan of two consecutive periods (the Ch’i and the Liang) during the Six Dynasties. Now, taking the last word in the poetic line—“fall,” in another meaning, “after”—we surmise that the riddle is shooting at something having to do with the character Ch’ien, royal surname of the short-lived dynasty that *followed* the Ch’i and Liang periods. But we are not yet finished. We still have to follow two hidden instructions in the first part of the line, first “removing the edge” (“without end”) of the character to yield “east,” then “dropping the tree” from this character, leaving us with the solution, the character for sun (陳 → 東 → 木 → 日).

At its most intricate, the game of Chinese literary riddles becomes a multistep, collective process of generating meaning that requires an almost contrapuntal interchange between cultivated players.³⁰ Some of the best examples of this are found in the literati fiction of the Ch’ing period, in works such as *Ching-hua yüan* and *Hunglou meng*. The case of *Honglou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) is particularly instructive. The pages of this great novel contain a number of cryptic verses and

outright riddles of prophetic significance, and the work as a whole is arguably a profound allegorical construction.³¹ But with the exception of a few pieces among the verse riddles in chapter 5 and chapter 22, most of the examples of wordplay in the text represent less a probing of the enigmas of existence than a sparkling celebration of the glories of Chinese literati culture at a moment of its greatest fullness and maturity.

Notes

1. See Chang 1986; Keightley 1983; Ho 1975.
2. See Keightley 1978.
3. See, for example, Harrison 1903, especially chap. 10.
4. Translations available in Legge 1895: vol. 3; see also Chang 1983 and Allan 1981. For the use of the term *euhemerization*, see Bodde 1961: 372ff.
5. See Legge 1895: vol. 4 and Waley 1978: 239–280, esp. 241–243, poem no. 238.
6. See Legge 1969 and Wilhelm 1977.
7. See Lau 1979: 5:13, 6:22, 7:21.
8. Wang Ch'ung's dates are 27–c. 100 A.D. The *Po-hu t'ung* is attributed to Pan Ku (32–39 A.D.). See also Ariel 1989.
9. See, for example, Ch'en 1964: 57–183.
10. The major source for the intellectual life of this period is still Liu I-ch'ing's fifth-century compendium *Shih-shuo hsin-yii* (Mather 1976). See also Girardot 1983, especially part 4.
11. See Henderson 1991.
12. An obvious exception to this is the notion of enlightenment through conundrums in Ch'an (Zen) practice.
13. Examples of this type abound in traditional Chinese fiction, especially works of *yen-i* historical narrative.
14. For the significance of the *yüan-hsiao* festival, see Cass 1979.
15. See Ch'en Hsiang 1977; Ch'ien 1972; Ch'en Kuang-yao 1930; Ch'eng 1957.
16. The term *sou* is usually glossed as “to seek out the hidden.” The character *yin* is of course the equivalent of “to conceal,” without the “words” classifier.
17. Hsün-tzu's dates are approximately 298–238 B.C. The riddle is cited in Ch'ien 1972: 12f. See also Ch'en Kuang-yao 1930: 15f.
18. See Ch'ien 1972: 23f.
19. Translated in Hawkes 1985: 130. I translate the line more literally to bring out the riddling quality.
20. See Ch'en Hsiang 1977: 11f.
21. Translated by Shih 1959: 78–83.
22. See Ch'eng 1957: 90ff.
23. One type of riddle, known as “pear blossoms” (*li-hua*, 梨花), is composed entirely of aural puns. This is considered a very crude form of the art.
24. For a fuller discussion of parallelism in Chinese literature, see Plaks 1990.
25. K'ung Jung's famous *li-ho* riddle is based on the same principle of composition (see text at n. 19).
26. For an exhaustive catalogue of these riddle patterns, see Wu 1973.
27. For example, the character “drunk” can be split vertically, yielding to die on (a certain) “day” (in the cyclical reckoning)—醉 → 酉 + 卒. Similarly, the character for “dew” can be split crosswise, giving us “rain” and “road,” for the poetic idea of a stormy journey—露 → 雨 + 路

28. See Li Po, *Yüeh-hsia tu-cho* (月下獨酌), translated in Liu and Lo 1975: 109.
29. See Tu Fu, *Teng-kao* (登高), in Liu and Lo 1975: 140f.
30. I am thinking of the game known as *she-fu* (射覆), originally a simple entertainment involving guessing a concealed object, later used to describe a kind of shuttle-cock riddling game based on allusion and counterallusion. See Ch'eng 1957: 7ff.
31. For a full discussion of the riddles in *Honglou meng*, see Eber: this volume.

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14

Riddles in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

IRENE EBER

Historians and critics of Chinese literature generally agree that *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng*) by Cao Xueqin (1716?–1763) is the greatest masterpiece of traditional Chinese fiction. Yet few of the many experts who have studied the novel in the past two hundred years agree on what the book is about.¹ *The Dream* is a complex and many-layered work, its texture rich and manifold, making it difficult to decide what the nature of this novel, in fact, is. Is it a novel of manners? an account of the decay and fall of an elite family? a novel of sentiment? a fictional account of enlightenment?² What are the novel's overriding themes?

Any attempt to understand this novel as fully as possible is complicated by its textual history. Cao Xueqin did not complete the novel, and after his death, several manuscript copies of an eighty-chapter version were privately circulated. In 1791 and 1792 the first 120-chapter version was published with prefaces by Cheng Weiyuan (1742?–1818?) and Gao E (1740?–1815?). The two twentieth-century scholars Hu Shi³ and Yu Pingbo⁴ stipulated that Gao E forged the final forty chapters of the novel. However, a 1959 discovery of a pre-1791 120-chapter manuscript seems to confirm Cheng and Gao's claim that they merely edited a complete manuscript, consisting of 120 chapters, rather than actually writing a portion of the novel.⁵

The above remarks are not without relevance to this topic. For if it is assumed, as I am prepared to argue, that the riddles are woven into the narrative, thus becoming an integral part of the novel's structure, then a certain unity of the text must be presupposed. Riddles as word and rhyme games, as conundrums, and as enigmatic sayings occur in various portions of the novel and are connected to specific events. They reinforce the symbolic structure of the novel by revealing relationships to past and future events. They point to linked relationships between characters and in many instances foretell their fates. This is especially true for the riddles in chapter 5 which predict the ultimate destiny of the major female characters.⁶ Hence it should be assumed that Cao, even if he did not write a final version of the last forty chapters, had at least a draft or outline, and that he had a plan for the completed novel.

In order to understand how the various kinds of riddles function in *The Dream* I will first briefly discuss several general features of Chinese riddles. Second, I will review some themes of the novel's plot to show the context within which the riddles occur, before finally turning to an exploration of the riddles themselves.

Types of Riddles and Their Uses

Like folk literature generally, the many different kinds of riddles in circulation among the common people of China were not taken note of until the "folk" themselves were discovered in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, only after the folklore movement came into being were proverbs, legends, and riddles seriously collected and studied.⁷ Chinese folk riddles, not much different from riddles in the West, can have various prose or poetic forms, the latter most prevalent as four-character jingles. Riddles were also frequently incorporated into folktales where solving the riddle provided the tension needed for the successful telling of the story.

Due to the peculiarities of the Chinese language, word games of every kind make use of puns and varying regional pronunciation and are popular in both the folk and literati traditions.⁸ But in the former, the riddle's function is entirely dependent on the spoken language (how the Chinese word sounds), whereas in the latter the written language (how the Chinese character looks) figures more importantly.

The more sophisticated riddle games of the literati are described as early as the fifth century A.D. in a work of literary criticism:⁹

A riddle is a piece of writing so circuitous that it leads people into a maze. Some riddles are based on the structure of characters, and some on the pictures and forms of articles. They show refinement and cleverness in the manipulation of thoughts, and simplicity and clarity in the array of expressions; their ideas are indirect and yet correct, and their language is ambiguous and yet suggestive.

The so-called lantern riddles (*dengmi*), traditionally reserved for the lantern festival on the fifteenth day of the first month,¹⁰ when riddles were pinned to lanterns, involved complicated word play and punning and were favored by the literary elite. Riddles, the solution for which depended on written characters or on references to literary works, have been popular since the Six Dynasties period (from the third to the sixth century).¹¹

Early examples of conundrums which are integral parts of a narrative text date from eighth-century stories of detection. The names of the murderers are hidden in the conundrums and can only be discerned by someone who is acquainted with games of deconstructing and reconstructing Chinese characters. Such stories were obviously meant to be read, and the enjoyment of the story depended on the readers' literary skill.¹²

Several portions of the *The Dream*, especially chapters 1 and 54, contain ample evidence of Cao's familiarity with Chinese literature,¹³ and he certainly would have been aware of the use of riddles as literary devices in earlier as well as in contemporary literary works. Thus he might have also known about, or actually read, a manuscript copy of the *Liaozhai zhiyi* (*Strange stories from the Liaozhai studio*) by Pu

Songling (1640–1715).¹⁴ Pu was an unsuccessful scholar who worked as a tutor in small provincial towns where he collected the *Liaozhai* stories in wine- and teashops. He reworked these vernacular tales into complex narratives, incorporating simple guessing and rhyme games into their structure.¹⁵

Cao Xueqin's use of riddles, however, both as a narrative device and as part of the poetic and symbolic structure in the novel, reached levels of sophistication that remain unsurpassed in Chinese literature. Although Cao continued to use puns and manipulated written characters, in his hands, riddles were transformed into elegant poetry and were imbued with philosophical significance. The riddle posing as light-hearted game becomes in *The Dream* also the riddle of life and death, of existence and nonexistence, the riddle with no solution.¹⁶ Before attempting an interpretation of the actual riddles, I want first to turn briefly to the novel.

Some Themes in The Dream of the Red Chamber

Cao Xueqin belonged to a prominent southern Chinese family with strong links to the imperial court. In the 1720s, however, the family suffered a series of reverses, which led to its fall and loss of power. By the time Cao wrote his masterpiece he was living in very reduced circumstances in the capital, Beijing. Thus, one of the major themes of the novel's plot, the moral decline and decay of the powerful Jia family, is no doubt autobiographical. In the novel, the family's connection to the court is established by the imperial concubine who is the elder sister of the chief protagonist, Bao-yu. To receive her properly following her appointment, a magnificent (and symbolically significant) garden is constructed. There Bao-yu and the maidens go to live at the height of Jia prosperity, and there the first signs of the family's moral decline appear.

Although *The Dream* abounds with characters, only a few are fully developed and play a major role. Among these are Jia Bao-yu and the two girls, Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai—without question the most famous love triangle in Chinese literature. The heartbreak of their love and the ultimately tragic fate of the two female characters (Dai-yu dies and Bao-chai enters a shortlived marriage with Bao-yu) forms another significant theme of the plot. But other maidens' love is doomed as well, and Cao lavishes much attention on their time of innocence in the garden and their harsh fate on the outside.

The theme of the path to enlightenment is also significant¹⁷—that is, the path taken by Bao-yu from his mythic beginnings as a stone in chapter 1 to his renunciation of the world in chapter 119. But enlightenment in the novel must not be understood in a strictly Buddhist sense. Rather, as Plaks has pointed out, Cao participated in the Neo-Confucian worldview of the eighteenth century, which considered enlightenment in broader and more inclusive terms.¹⁸ Enlightenment (*wu* or *jue*) for the educated Chinese could have a whole range of meanings: intellectual awareness, moral intuition, a new stage in a person's spiritual life, or a religious experience leading to a change of direction in life.¹⁹ This does not mean, however, that the basic Buddhist assumption, which considers that only by passing through the mundane world can enlightenment be achieved, is neglected. To the contrary, only in this world is

enlightenment possible. This linking of enlightenment to existence in the world leads to one other basic assumption in both Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism—namely, that human beings are either inherently spiritual or are capable of the highest spirituality.

The theme of the path to enlightenment functions as the metaphysical underpinning of the novel and is connected to various characteristic features such as the dual planes of existence, complementary bipolarity, and, in a more general sense, the puzzling combination of complex events with seemingly simple surface actions. It is this underpinning which exposes why the rise to power is coupled with its decline and deterioration. It exposes why even the most sublime love cannot endure in a transitory world. And it exposes the limits of sensual enjoyment and its delusions.

In the novel, the riddles frequently become vehicles for these complex metaphysical messages. At other times, the riddles serve to explain intricate webs of relationships between persons, or they may point to special characteristics of the protagonists. In what follows I shall discuss a number of these riddles, in particular, those that contain matters of philosophical significance or occupy an important place in the novel's interpretation.

Rhymed Riddles and Rebuses in Chapter 5 of The Dream

Chapter 1 of the novel introduces the reader to Bao-yu and Dai-yu's mythic beginnings. He was a stone, rejected as unfit by the goddess when she repaired heaven. Dai-yu was a flower which the stone watered each day with dew, thus preparing her for existence. The appearance of both stone and flower in the world is mediated by the immortal fairy (*xiengu*) of Disenchantment who presides over the Realm of Illusion (*taixu huanying*).

In chapter 5, one of the pivotal chapters of the novel, Bao-yu returns to the Realm of Illusion after having fallen asleep in Qin-shi's (one of the young wives) bedroom. He dreams that Qin-shi conducts him to the Realm of Illusion where he sees rows of palaces that are actually offices. Upon Bao-yu's urging, the fairy consents to let him inspect the Office of the Unfortunate in Life (*boming*), where the registers (*ce*) of "The Twelve Beauties of Jinling" are kept.²⁰ He picks up registers at random, leafs through them, looks at the pictures, and reads the accompanying verse riddles, but he cannot make sense of either the pictures or the verses, and he is unable to understand the song riddles that are later performed for him.

The problem that the riddles take up and that Bao-yu balks at—or is incapable of—confronting is the problem of suffering in the mundane world. According to Cao Xueqin, human beings suffer because they are endowed with feelings, sensibilities, emotions, the capacity for love, and the life of the senses, all of which he expressed with the word *qing*. Because of *qing*, one is hurt, hurts others, and suffers the pain of hurting and of being hurt. But how real, how ultimately real, is any of this in a world characterized by fleeting transitoriness? The riddles express the absurd contradiction of supposing that the senses and the suffering they impose are real when in fact they are not at all real. The enigmatic couplet at the entrance of the Realm of Illusion reads:

The false (*jia*) becomes true (*zhen*) when the true is false
 When non-being (*wu*) becomes being (*you*), being turns into non-being.
 (Cao 1976: 36):²¹

The couplet can be read in various ways. In my translation the emphasis is on the confusion of both truth and falsehood and the mundane and supramundane. When perception of the true state of existence is clouded, the state of non-being cannot be attained. More concretely, when Bao-yu as stone chose existence, he also chose involvement with the senses and, together with this, the intertwining of truth and falsehood, as well as the confusions that arise from sense perceptions. When he chose existence, he also chose the suffering that accompanies it, imaginary though it may be. Bao-yu's life of the senses leads to his involvement with the maidens in the Jia household, in particular with Lin Dai-yu and Xue Bao-chai. The rebus for the two girls and the accompanying riddle poem in the register expresses this clearly.

The picture shows two dead trees, a jade belt suspended in their branches, and in the snow beneath the trees a half-buried golden hairpin. By manipulating the symbolism of their names,²² the rebus reveals how Bao-yu's fate is entwined with that of the two girls. Dai-yu is associated with wood, as is indicated by her surname Lin, meaning trees, hence the two trees. Bao-chai is associated with snow, her surname Xue being a homophone for snow. The three protagonists are linked by their personal names. Bao-yu and Dai-yu share "yu" (jade) in their personal names. Bao-yu and Bao-chai share "bao" (precious) in their personal names. The "chai" in Bao-chai means hair ornament, or hair clasp, and is associated with metal. Thus the golden hairpin in the rebus refers to Bao-chai, and the jade belt to Bao-yu.

The meaning of the picture, therefore, is: Lin Dai-yu will die (the two dead trees), Bao-chai will lead a half life, and Bao-yu will be forever suspended between the two girls, though united in non-being with Dai-yu. The origin of both, it will be remembered, is that of stone and flower in their mythic existence in chapter 1.

The first couplet of the quatrain appended to the picture tells something about the nature of the girls, by describing the one as having hidden virtue (*ji de*) and the other as having ceaseless talent (*xu cai*). My guess would be that Dai-yu is the talented and Bao-chai the virtuous one. The meaning of virtue in connection with Bao-chai must be taken in the Confucian sense of accepting and carrying out her duties to the family and to the continued existence of the family by giving birth to Bao-yu's son.

Whereas the other girls have one rebus and one verse as well as having one poem each in the song cycle, Dai-yu and Bao-chai share one riddle in the register and in the song that follows. This is due not only to their involvement with Bao-yu, but probably, as Hawkes suggests, because "they represent two complementary aspects of a single ideal woman."²³ Separate, they are incomplete, or better, imperfect; as one they are perfect, possessing both talent (*cai*) and virtue (*de*). Unfortunately, in the mundane world, such perfection does not exist, and those who seek it forever shuttle back and forth between one imperfection and another, never finding full satisfaction or complete happiness, as is the case with Bao-yu.

The first poem in the song cycle "The Dream of the Red Chamber" expresses this gnawing unhappiness. The song is the riddle of imperfection. The following is a rough translation of a portion of this long poem:²⁴

All praise the harmonious union of gold and jade
 But I recall the earlier solemn oath of wood and stone.
 Vacantly I face the snow's crystal glitter high on the mountain
 And still I cannot forget the solitary fairy wood who left the world.

Gold and jade refer to Bao-chai and Bao-yu, respectively, and wood and stone to Dai-yu and Bao-yu. Snow is once again Bao-chai and the fairy wood is Dai-yu.

The second song is about Dai-yu and Bao-yu and raises yet another question. Together with the imperfection of existence there is the illusion, even perhaps futility, of expectations when, in effect, their unhappy love is predestined. If they, Dai-yu and Bao-yu, were not meant for each other, asks the riddle, then why did they meet in this life? And if fate (*yuan*) had destined them for one another, why was their meeting in this world in vain?²⁵

The problem of predestination is part of the novel's Neo-Confucian, and perhaps even more powerful, Buddhist intellectual background. Chapter 1 opens with the mythic origins of both Bao-yu and Dai-yu as flower and stone, each with their special characteristics that accompany them throughout existence in the mundane world. Thus the drama that is to be enacted, together with its illusions and delusions, has its higher, spiritual beginnings, where there are no confusions of truth and falsehood, and no suffering brought on by emotional entanglements; where illusions are known for what they are. The drama that is to be enacted is, however, already recorded and is, therefore, predestined.²⁶

But why is it that if human beings have these higher, spiritual beginnings they do not also predispose them to recognize and change their destiny, to change the record, as it were? Cao has poetically restated in this riddle, the second song, a major Neo-Confucian dilemma: the function of will versus what heaven has decreed (*ming*).

There is, Thomas Metzger has argued, a problem, if not a contradiction, between *ming* and the human will, often desirous of changing the decree: "Burdened with 'what heaven has decreed,' did it [human will] really have the potentiality to intervene effectively?" Neo-Confucian writings do not explicitly discuss the question of fate, he writes, yet it was a crucial issue where individual moral action was concerned.²⁷ To what extent is moral action compatible with predetermination? Might it not be futile to engage in moral action if the outcome is, for better or for worse, predetermined? Neo-Confucians did not resolve the dilemma, and Metzger explains that "fate . . . was accepted not as an excuse to avoid moral exertion but as the painful price of moral exertion." For the sake of moral action, painful fate needs to be endured.²⁸

This, however, is not really a solution, and the novel's Bao-yu prefers ignorance to this kind of understanding. Hence Bao-yu does not understand the rebuses, the verses appended to them, or the song cycle which the fairy ordered performed for him. Indeed, he is bored by the singing, and the fairy quickly ends the performance. However, she makes one final attempt to have him grasp that which he resists—understanding. The drama of the mundane world need not be enacted, she implies, if only he were to comprehend the true nature of those blind feelings, that blind love (*qing*) which she calls "the lust of the mind" (*yiyin*). This expression, says the fairy, you can understand in your heart but not in words; you can understand its supernatural power but not by means of language.²⁹ Bao-yu no more grasps this riddle than he did the earlier ones. He forgets the dream as soon as he wakes.

The fairy's riddles deal with the ultimate fate of the major female figures in the novel. In addition, the riddles also reveal aspects of their character, in particular those that are hidden from view.

Qin-shi, Jia Rong's young and lively wife, who led Bao-yu to the Realm of Illusion, has a sweet and sunny disposition. There is nothing improper in her outward behavior, yet the riddle and song-riddle tell a different story. The picture shows a girl hanging from a beam. The first two lines of the riddle are:³⁰

Love (*qing*) is heaven, love is the sea, love is the body's delusion
When love meets its like, lust (*yin*) will rule.

In this riddle, *yin*, or lust, should be most likely translated as licentiousness, as excess of *qing* (*qing* doubled), which is negative and portends destruction. And this, indeed, is the message of the twelfth song about Qin-shi which foretells the fall of the Ning branch of the family, the "predetermined cause [being] love."³¹ The rebus shows Qin-shi having hanged herself, though she actually dies in bed (chapter 13). Various explanations have been offered, including Cao's excessive tampering with the text. According to Hawkes, the novel suggests in chapter 7 that Qin-shi had an incestuous relationship with her father-in-law,³² which could be why Cao attributes to her this hidden sensuous nature. For our purposes, it is important to realize that, even though the author shows us a carefree Qin-shi, the riddle reveals the other, sensuous, aspect of her personality, an aspect that is ultimately destructive.

Lantern Riddles in Chapter 22 of The Dream

As part of the New Year celebrations, Yuan-chun, the imperial concubine, sends a lantern riddle to the mansion for the youngsters to solve. The young people respond enthusiastically by launching a lantern riddle party (chap. 22). They are joined by Bao-yu's stern father, Jia Zheng, and Grandmother Jia, who seldom misses any kind of entertainment. Jia Zheng examines the riddles one by one. He finds that while they are all about everyday objects, the riddles also contain recurrent images of sadness, grief, and loss. "What can it be [thinks Jia Zheng] that makes these innocent young creatures all produce language that is so tragic and inauspicious? It is almost as if they were all destined to be unfortunate and shortlived and were unconsciously foretelling their destiny."³³ Jia Zheng's premonition is unfortunately correct. The riddles of the three "springs" (*chun*: Yuan-chun, Ying-chun, and Tan-chun), Grandmother Jia's granddaughters, for example, all contain predictions of their future tragedies. The riddles are written as elegant seven-character poems, similar to the other poetry in the novel which is either in seven- or five-character verse. The calamities that Jia Zheng refers to are hinted at not in the solutions of the riddles, but in the riddles themselves.

The answer to Yuan-chun's riddle is fireworks—"an object of amusement" is the riddle's clue—but the last line of the quatrain declares ominously:³⁴

Look around, already turned to ash.

Yuan-chun's death occurs in chapter 95, with clear signs of an end to the family's privileged position at court.³⁵ Ying-chun's riddle describes a useful object, an aba-

cus, but her riddle also contains an unfavorable allusion. The second couplet of her quatrain reads:³⁶

Why [am I] confused (*fenfen luan*) all day long?
because [my] *yin-yang* count is obstructed.³⁷

The disorder referred to in the first line is more emphatically underscored by the second line, where *yin* and *yang* are said not to function. Although still much in the future, following her marriage to a brutal man in a neglectful (that is, disorderly) family, Ying-chun meets her death in chapter 109. By then, the fortunes of the family are already at a very low ebb. In the same chapter, Grandmother Jia falls ill, and her death takes place in chapter 110. The foreboding of disaster is also contained in Tan-chun's riddle, the solution to which is a kite.³⁸ Her fate in chapter 100 is to be parted from her family and to be sent in marriage to a distant province. The second couplet of her riddle clearly foretells this:³⁹

Bereft of strength once the cord is severed
[I] drift off on the wind griefstricken by the separation.

Turning now to Bao-chai's riddle, which will be examined in some detail, the solution is an everyday object, a wickerwork cylinder placed in summer between bedclothes to provide coolness. It reads as follows:⁴⁰

I have eyes without pupils, inside [I'm] hollow
When the lotus emerges from the water, [we] meet in mutual pleasure
When the *wu-tung* leaves fall, separate in parting
Affectionate husband and wife, will not reach winter.

The "have" and "without" in the first line of the riddle is the familiar Daoist juxtaposition of *you* and *wu*, or being and non-being, existence and nonexistence. Having eyes and no pupils means that there can be no "seeing." From the Chan Buddhist point of view Bao-chai does not "see" (recognize) the content of existence and nonexistence. The second line refers both to her nature as water and to springtime, when the lotus blooms. For her this is, however, not a propitious situation. As pointed out earlier, her surname (Xue) and part of her given name (chai) reveal Bao-chai's association with coldness and aloofness, with the *yin* part of the *yin-yang* conception of complementary dualities. Although this should also give her an association with water, presumably favorable when combined with spring and fertility, in her case something else is indicated.

The meeting in mutual pleasure—that is, her marriage to Bao-yu when she conceives his child—is as ephemeral as spring and the blooming of the lotus flower, for Bao-chai is more closely associated with autumn and winter; hence, the third line about autumn and the passage of time. The *wu-tung* tree has ancient mythic associations and is said to be the only tree on which the magic *luan* bird (often called phoenix, though it has none of the phoenix's characteristics) can alight. In autumn, the tree sheds its leaves, and at the beginning of autumn, in the eighth month, Bao-chai and Bao-yu part (chapter 119) when he sets out for the imperial examinations, never to return. The *wu-tung* imagery thus points to the mythic beginning and end of Bao-yu's life. The last sentence, namely that the marriage ends by winter, clearly

shows that henceforth Bao-chai's existence will correspond to the winter element and snow that is her nature.

Finally, the riddle's reference to spring and autumn as the two seasons during which the events of meeting and parting take place is in keeping with traditional historical nomenclature⁴¹—namely, that history unfolds not between summer and winter but between spring and autumn. The spring and autumn juxtaposition is also related to *yin-yang* complementary opposites. The beginning of summer, when *yang* is at its height, is in spring; the beginning of winter, when *yin* is at its height, is in autumn. This alternation between the complementary dualities of existence and nonexistence, spring and autumn, meeting and parting, flowering and withering, are thus repeated throughout the riddle.

Bao-yu's riddle seems, in comparison, deceptively simple. But this is hardly the case, for the riddle says a great deal about his personality, as well as indicating something about his ultimate destiny. The riddle reads:⁴²

You face south
It faces north.
You appear sad, it is also sad.
You appear glad, it is also glad.

The solution is a mirror, and Cao's choice of a mirror for Bao-yu's riddle reveals the complexities he intends us to see. Mirrors are associated with magic, as well as with telling the truth. Mirrors, however, also illustrate delusions and fantasy, for they contain the confusion of the real and the false. For example, Jia Rui dies after repeatedly jumping into a mirror in order to copulate with Xi-feng (chapter 12).

In a less sinister vein, Bao-yu, having heard that there is an exact replica of himself in Nanjing surnamed Zhen, dreams of meeting him (chapter 56). Upon waking he finds himself calling to his own image in the mirror which faces the bed.⁴³ The implications of the northern (Beijing) Jia Bao-yu facing the southern (Jiangnan) Zhen Bao-yu in the mirror are subtle but extremely significant. The surname Jia is a homo-phone for false or unreal. Zhen is a homophone for true or real. The truth-falsity, reality-illusion juxtaposition is, as Plaks explains, "the central metaphor of the novel's allegorical structure." The Zhens and the Jias meet or hear about one another in various portions of the novel; this is, moreover, not the only chapter in which the two Bao-yus are mentioned. Interpreting the truth-falsity metaphor is not easy, writes Plaks. Nonetheless, he suggests that the juxtaposition forms a continuum rather than a dialectical opposition of aspects of experience.⁴⁴ Cao masterfully combines the question of what constitutes the real and the imagined, the true and the false, with looking into the mirror and with the additional question of who Bao-yu, in fact, is.

This is not all. Bao-yu is described as a simpleton (chapter 5), as being glad when others are glad, as being sad when others are sad. His mind strangely is and is not his own. The extreme condition of literally losing his mind occurs when he loses his jade (chapter 95). He becomes incapable of thinking, speaking, or acting and can only do so when prompted by others. The "no-mind" state in lines three and four thus also has Chan Buddhist implications.

Other Riddles in the Novel

The young people play still other kinds of riddle games. Aunt Xue's niece poses a series of ingenious riddles in which the description of a locality conceals the solution (chapter 51). Cao Xueqin has not supplied the answers to these clever and erudite riddles, but the translator produced his own convincing solutions. For example, the riddle titled "Guang-ling" (the starting place of the Grand Canal), has the answer "toothpick." The riddle reads:⁴⁵

Your crows and cicadas no more you shall hear
By the old Sui embankment back home in the South;
But the scandalous story of those wanton times
Wags in many an idle, unsavory mouth.⁴⁶

Aside from these riddles, which demand an expert knowledge of Chinese history, there are riddles that deal with the Confucian classics (chapter 50), where the answer depends on the combining and recombining of parts of characters similar to examples described earlier.

Still another set of riddles involves a complicated drinking game. Objects are chosen, dice are thrown to obtain numbers to pair up, and quotations and lines from poems having to do with the objects are strung together (chapter 62). This is called "covering" and "shooting" and tests the literary prowess of the contestants. While on the surface this riddle party deteriorates into a noisy finger-guessing and drinking gathering, the symbolic functioning of the riddles is also not neglected here. Bao-chai chooses "precious" (*bao*), which Bao-yu assumes refers both to the jade he wears and to his name. He, to spite her, chooses "hairpin" (*chai*) from her name, which is then combined as "jade hairpin" (*Yuchai*). From an old poem he recites the line:⁴⁷

A broken jade hairpin, the red candle is cold.

This line should be linked to Bao-chai's earlier riddle in chapter 22 because it reinforces that riddle's tragic prophecy. In the first part of the game, portions of their names are joined to form a new union, Yu-chai. But the broken jade in the line of poetry indicates the breaking of the union. Red candles are a symbol of marriage; the cold red candle indicates that the marriage has ended.⁴⁸

By means of these and other riddles and games the author conveys that Bao-chai is no less a tragic figure than Dai-yu. The latter and Bao-yu are deeply in love, but she is rejected as a partner for marriage and dies brokenhearted. Bao-chai, who is forced into an essentially loveless union that is doomed because Bao-yu is not meant to be of this world, will also not experience happiness or fulfillment, however. Although there is no symbolic name linkage between Bao-chai and Dai-yu, as there is between each of the girls and Bao-yu, they should not be seen as diametrically opposed rivals. They are sisters in spirit and fate, and their drawing closer together from chapter 45 on⁴⁹ is not a coincidence.

The novel, therefore, also expresses this dilemma: gentle and sensitive spirits cannot experience love and happiness in a world where other concerns determine human relationships. Happiness and love are ephemeral like the season of spring. For one brief moment, while the girls and Bao-yu live in the garden, they are allowed

to articulate their genuine feelings, they are allowed to be gentle and sensitive. But this time swiftly passes, and as they leave the garden for loveless and incompatible marriages, they either die or meet tragedy in other ways. Bao-yu, having experienced the sorrow and end of love, leaves the world and returns to his true state—that of a rejected stone.

This inquiry into Chinese riddles has attempted to show their variety, their various uses in literary narratives, and, in particular, their function in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Although still consisting of punning or manipulation of written characters, riddles in Cao Xueqin's hands were transformed into elegant poetry and imbued with philosophical significance. The definition of riddles by the fifth-century literary critic quoted at the beginning of this essay—namely, that riddles “show refinement and cleverness in the manipulation of thoughts” and that “their language is ambiguous and yet suggestive”—still held true some 1300 years later.

In *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, the author has used riddles to reinforce and enrich the symbolic structure that link the many characters to one another and to the larger cosmic context, which makes reading this novel such an exciting adventure. But, in addition, the riddles are also a means of raising questions that were of great concern to him and to other eighteenth-century intellectuals.

These questions deal first of all with the meaning of individual existence—with the predicament of the human being who, aware of his spiritual strivings, is nonetheless hopelessly mired in this muddy, corrupt world. They also deal with the problem of fate: whether a life is destined to be what it is, or whether a person has the means of changing destiny. Moreover, how can one know and act, when “ignorance” (in the Buddhist sense) prevents one from knowing? Certainly not all, but many of the riddles reveal a perception of the world that is essentially tragic. Youth and beauty last but a day; wealth and honor are ephemeral. The human being is the instrument of his own destruction in this world. This is not simply pessimism. The point of these riddles is that questions of life and death, of existence and nonexistence, of truth and falsity, must necessarily remain riddles without solutions.

Honglou meng Glossary

薄命	boming	高鶚	Gao E
		廣陵	guangling
才	cai		
曹雪芹	Cao Xueqin	假 and 真	jia and zhen
冊	ce	機德	ji de
程偉元	Cheng Weiyuan	賈寶玉	Jia Bao-yu
		賈溶	Jia Rong
德	de	賈瑞	Jia Rui
燈謎	dengmi	賈政	Jia Zheng
紛紛亂	fenfen luan	林黛玉	Lin Daiyu
		聊齋志異	Liao zhai zhiyi
胡適	Hu Shi		
		命	ming

蒲松齡	Pu songling	薛寶釵	Xue Baochai
秦氏	Qin-shi	意淫	yi yin
情	qing	淫	yin
太虛幻境	Taixu hunjing	迎春	Ying-chun
		陰陽	yin-yang
		玉釵	yuchai
無 and 有	wu and you	俞平伯	Yu Pingbo
		緣	yuan
熙鳳	Xi-feng	元春	Yuan-chun
仙故	xiangu		
絮才	xucai	脂硯齋	Zhi-yen-zhai

Notes

My thanks to Prof. Steve Kaplan for reading an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Redologists-Hongxue scholars, both traditional and modern, are too numerous to mention. However, several twentieth-century studies should be pointed out. Hu Shi's pioneering essay of 1921 (1953) stressed the autobiographical content of the novel; Hu's work stimulated later studies on the Cao family. Yu Pingbo's (1975) extensive research has dealt with such facets of the novel as various manuscript versions, the final forty chapters, or names by which the novel is known. In English, there is Wu Shih-ch'ang (1961) who subjected the eighteenth-century contemporary commentaries to meticulous study. Lucien Miller (1975) has dealt with the aesthetic aspects of the text. Andrew Plaks (1976) has made a valuable contribution with his analysis of the allegorical structure of the novel and Cao's use of paired concepts, or complementary bipolarity.

2. Nienhauser 1986: 452.

3. Hu 1953.

4. Yu 1923.

5. Hsia 1968: 250.

6. Hsia 1968: 255. There are discrepancies, the most noteworthy being Qin-shi's death from illness rather than suicide, but these may very well be due to Cao's frequent revisions of the text.

7. The folklore movement was less a professional pursuit and more of an intellectual undertaking to explore China's past and the connections between folk and literati culture. The highly respected essayist Zhou Zuoren, for example, extolled the folk riddle as primitive poetry (Huang 1985: 156).

8. So pervasive apparently was riddle telling that even nineteenth-century Christian missionaries took note of it (See Anon. 1870: 77, and Arendt 1870: 184).

9. Liu 1959: 82.

10. The lantern festival was part of China's prolonged New Year celebrations. The lantern festival is thought to be no older than one thousand years and is probably associated with fertility (Eberhard 1952: 64-65).

11. Nienhauser 1986: 78.

12. *Tangdai Congshu* 1806: 597-598, 742-743.

13. The so-called *Zhi-yen-zhai*, or Red Inkstone, commentators of Cao's manuscript, probably the author's relatives, or in any event persons who knew him well, stress repeatedly how his novel differs from all others that preceded it (Wang 1978: 194-195).

14. Pu completed the manuscript in 1679, but it was not printed until 1766, three years after Cao's death (Chang and Chang 1981: 60).

15. For example "Cizhi" (The cricket), or "Jiaping gongzi" (The young gentleman from Jiaping), Pu 1979: 329–332, 154–156.

16. Lucien Miller describes this as the "'riddling technique for enlightenment' in the novel [with] a surface appearance of simplicity [which] belies an underlying puzzling complexity" (Miller 1975: 105).

17. David Hawkes considered this the central theme in a lecture which he delivered in 1963 (Hawkes 1986: 17).

18. Plaks 1977: 176, 182.

19. De Bary 1975: 183–184.

20. The author had intended in a final chapter to give a "Roster of Lovers" in which all sixty female characters were to be listed. They were to be arranged into five groups of twelve names each; hence, the registers of twelve beauties in this chapter (Cao 1978–1986: 1:527).

21. Cao 1976: 36. I hope I will be forgiven for substituting my very crude though literal translations for Hawkes's elegant and literary translations. For the purposes of my interpretations, the literal translations convey more clearly the complex philosophical and symbolic matter that inform these riddles.

22. Among Western critics of the novel, Andrew Plaks in particular has paid attention to how Cao Xueqin manipulated relationships of various characters by means of associations and correlations contained in their names (Plaks 1977: 163–202).

23. Cao 1978–1986: 1:528.

24. Cao 1976: 40–41.

25. Ibid., 41.

26. Chapter 1 relates that the novel, titled *The Story of the Stone*, was already recorded on the stone in the mythic world.

27. Metzger 1977: 127–128.

28. Ibid., 132.

29. Cao 1976: 43.

30. Ibid., 39.

31. Ibid., 43.

32. Cao 1978–1986: 1:42–43.

33. Hawkes 1978–1986: 1:450.

34. Cao 1976: 175.

35. Hawkes 1978–1986: 4:310.

36. Cao 1976: 175.

37. That is, the complementary bipolarity according to which existence is organized and functions no longer operates. A fatal outcome must be assumed even though none of the outward conditions have as yet arisen that make this outcome inevitable.

38. The kite symbol accompanies Ta-chun throughout the novel. It is in her riddle song in chapter 5 and foretells her marriage that takes place in chapter 70 (Hawkes 1986: 12–13). Whereas lanterns are associated with the New Year holiday, kite flying is associated with the "Bright and Clear" (*ching ming*) early spring holiday.

39. Cao 1976: 175.

40. Ibid., 176.

41. History chronicles, for example, of the Zhou period (1122–221 B.C.) were titled Spring and Autumn (*Chun-qiu*).

42. Cao 1976: 176.

43. Hawkes (1986: 14–15) points out several symbolic uses of mirrors in the novel without, however, going into specific detail.
44. Plaks 1977: 192–193.
45. Cao 1978–1986: 2:513.
46. The Grand Canal was constructed in the reign of Sui Yangdi (605–616), who is said to have been a villainous and debauched ruler.
47. Cao 1976: 535.
48. Wong Kam-ming presents further details on the episode surrounding this game (1977: 222–225).
49. Wang 1978: 217.

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V

NOTES FROM THE WEST

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15

One Voice and Many Legs: Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx

FREDDIE ROKEM

They are like punning riddles which are asked at feasts or the children's puzzle about the eunuch aiming at the bat, with what he hit him, as they say in the puzzle, and upon what the bat was sitting. The individual objects of which I am speaking are also a riddle, and have a double sense: nor can you fix them in your mind, either as being or not-being, or both, or neither.

Plato, *The Republic*

Medvedenko: There's a riddle: What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three in the evening?

Sorin: Precisely. And on the back at night. Thank you, I can manage alone.

Anton Chekhov, *The Sea Gull*

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said, 'I want to ask one question. Why didn't I recognize my mother?' 'You gave the wrong answer', she said. 'When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn't say anything about Woman'. 'When you say Man', said Oedipus, 'you include Women too. Everyone knows that'. She said, 'That's what you think'.

Muriel Rukeyser

In the third book of *The Library*, Apollodorus relates how, after the burial of Laius, Creon, his brother-in-law, took over the rule of Thebes. During his reign, however, a great calamity in the form of a Sphinx befell the city. This hybrid creature sent by Hera "had the face of a woman, the breast and feet and tail of a lion, and the wings of a bird,"¹ and "having learned a riddle from the Muses she sat on Mount Phicium, and propounded it to the Thebans." The oracle declared that as long as they could

not answer its riddle, the Sphinx would snatch away different individuals from the city and “gobble” them up. Only after Creon had lost his own son Haemon did he proclaim that the person who solved the riddle would be rewarded with “both the kingdom and the wife of Laius.” Oedipus found the solution: “the Sphinx then threw herself from the citadel”; as a result, Oedipus not only inherited the kingdom (to which he actually was the rightful heir as Laius’s son) but also married his mother and had four children with her. Creon turned the political power and his sister over to Oedipus, the killer of his own father.

Considering the fate of Oedipus, as it has been given literary form by Sophocles in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is difficult to free oneself of the suspicion that the Sphinx somehow “intentionally” led Oedipus into the trap of carrying out the second half of the oracle, that of marrying his mother and begetting children with her, by “making” his the correct answer. There could even have been some uncanny cooperation between the two supernatural figures, the oracle and the Sphinx, or between the Sphinx and Jocasta, intentionally leading Oedipus into the trap of his mother’s bed. Teiresias makes the connection between Oedipus’s solution to the riddle and his eventual fall, or as he himself formulates it: “Yet ‘twas just that fortune / of solving the riddle / that undid thee.”²

Initially Oedipus’s answer to the riddle of the Sphinx led to his triumph; it made him the ruler of Thebes and the husband of the widow-queen in what could easily be seen as a traditional riddling situation at weddings. The man possessing abstract knowledge is rewarded with the carnal knowledge of the nuptial bed as well as the political power in Thebes. In solving the riddle of the Sphinx, a riddle dealing directly with the human body and the identity of man, Oedipus draws our attention to the difference—which for him becomes fatal—between his abstract and his practical knowledge. While he can solve the intricate intellectual puzzle of man’s universal identity, he does not know who he himself really is and he cannot identify his own father and mother. In turn, Jocasta fails to identify her own son. There is a rift between abstract and practical knowledge that leads to both his and Jocasta’s final fall. The fact that his answer leads to both his triumph and his fall (through the discovery that the oracle has been carried out in detail) raises a number of complex issues, in particular the aforementioned doubt as to whether Oedipus actually “knew” the full answer (or all the answers) to the initial riddle of the Sphinx.

The notion that the riddle of the Sphinx was only given a temporary solution, when this creature threw itself from the citadel, can be approached in different ways. Some critics, as mentioned, have viewed Jocasta as a reincarnation of the enigmatic Sphinx who helped realize the secret wishes of the mother. The hybrid character of the Sphinx as woman, lion, and bird has also been considered as the basis for her radical unreliability. It is also possible that the oracle and the Sphinx are carrying out some cosmic plan of which Oedipus is the victim.

By taking a close look at the riddle itself, which, significantly enough, does not appear in Sophocles’ text but can be found in other sources, it is possible to enrich our understanding of Sophocles’ Oedipal drama. Interesting issues concerning the limits of dramatic discourse arise from the fact that neither the oracle nor the Sphinx appear in the dramatic text, while only the prophecy of the oracle before Oedipus’s birth is quoted in Sophocles’ text (and not the riddle of the Sphinx). The oracle sets

up a narrative sequence that can be acted on, and both his parents, as well as Oedipus himself, take radical action when they learn it. The riddle of the Sphinx goes much deeper in the existential and philosophical consciousness of the play, but it does not define what the hero is going to do—the “drama” in the Greek sense of the term, which means “to do”—it rather defines who he is, his being. The fact that the riddle is situated outside the dramatic discourse perhaps tells us that it is a text that cannot be acted on and apparently has to be integrated on other levels of the textual universe created by Sophocles’ drama. The riddle functions as a hidden subtext, as a textual unconscious which has to be not only revealed and discovered but, as I want to show in this paper, also radically re-defined and re-solved at different points in Sophocles’ play.

Here is the exact formulation of the riddle of the Sphinx given by Apollodorus in the narrative sequence just quoted:

What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed
and three-footed?

Oedipus answers: “Man; for as a babe he is four-footed, going on four limbs, as an adult he is two-footed, and as an old man he gets besides a third support in a staff.”³

Apart from Apollodorus, who in *The Library* has presented the whole narrative sequence leading up to the plague with which Sophocles starts his play, the riddle of the Sphinx and its answer also appears in Athenaeus:

As for the riddle of the Sphinx, Asclepiades in *Stories from Tragedy* says that it ran like this:

“There walks on land a creature of two feet, of four feet, and of three; it has one voice, but sole among the animals that grow on land or in the sky or beneath the sea, it can change its nature; nay, when it walks propped on most feet, then is the speed in its limbs less than it has ever been before.”⁴

It can also be found in the prefaces to Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*:

There is on earth a creature with two legs, four legs and one voice:
three legs too. Alone it changes in form of creatures who exist
on earth, in air, on sea. But when it goes resting on more feet
then the strength in its limbs is weaker.

Answer

Listen like it or not, ill winged songstress of death
to my voice, which will end your folly.
You mean man, who crawling on the ground
at first is four footed, a babe from the womb
then in old age leans on a stick as third foot,
with a burden on back, bent double in old age.⁵

The tension created between the fact that man’s body goes through radical changes in the use of his feet in order to walk and to keep his balance, and the fact that he has only one voice, is the basis for the paradoxical nature of the riddle. In all these versions of the riddle the tension between the one unchanging voice and the varying number of legs of the creature referred to is strongly emphasized. Only in Apollodorus’s version are the number of legs given in the chronological sequence of

their appearance in the ages of man (four–two–three) while the other two versions give two–four–three as the sequence. In none of these versions are the number of legs presented in their numerical sequence (two–three–four), thus indirectly bringing out the lack of harmony in the gradual development of man. The most important feature of the riddle is that the oneness of the voice is opposed to the almost irrational flux of the changing number of legs. The dialectic opposition between the one and the many is not only a feature of the riddle but can also be interpreted from several perspectives that are directly relevant to Sophocles' play.

This opposition is a central theme in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The issue of Oedipus's possible guilt in killing Laius depends on this, because the herdsman who has witnessed the murder of Laius had always claimed that there were several murderers, while Oedipus knew that he had been alone when killing an unknown man—and therefore seemed, at least to himself, not to be the murderer of the king. When this differentiation becomes crucial, Oedipus tries to defend himself against any possible accusations by making an almost proverbial statement: "The one and the many cannot be one and the same."⁶ This is the point in the play where the detective mystery of Oedipus's involvement in the crime will soon be discovered because of the new, hitherto hidden, evidence brought forward by the herdsman, that changes the evidence from many murderers to one.

This may seem strange in light of the riddle of the Sphinx as formulated in all the three sources quoted above, because the point of the riddle is that the *one* voice and the *many* legs belong to one and the same creature. The opposition between *one* witness (the herdsman) and *many* robbers also contains an ironic complication. As the dramatic text unfolds itself, it turns out that in fact there was actually at least one more "witness," the blind Teiresias, and there were not many murderers, but one, Oedipus himself. *One of the developments in the play is therefore a reversal in which the one witness turns out to be more than one and the many murderers are reduced to one. The contradictions between the one and the many on the level of evidence have to be solved.*

But this is not the only instance where the opposition between the one and the many, constituting the paradoxical structure of the original riddle, is presented in Sophocles' play. This theme is clearly formulated already in the beginning when Creon returns from the oracle after learning the cause for the present plague, the unresolved murder of Laius. Creon emphasizes that there was only one witness and that he "could tell for certain but one thing of all that he saw" (118–119). This does not discourage Oedipus, however, for he answers that "one thing might show the clue to many, could we but get a small beginning for hope" (120–121). At this point, Oedipus admits that the one may lead to the many in the sense that one clue may lead to the full picture, just as in the riddle one and many coexist: the differentiation between them has been erased, and the one and the many belong to the same entity or being. Later, however, when he is closer to the solution of the murder, as the quotation clearly shows, the one and the many are irreconcilable; they can no longer coexist.

It is, of course, no coincidence that there was only *one* witness to the murder and that he claims he saw *many* robbers. This opposition evidently points at the central conflict developed by the play, as well as the riddle of the Sphinx. Creon also confirms the evidence that Laius was killed by many robbers "not in one man's might,

but with full many hands" (123), creating in this instance an opposition between the one and the many with a direct reference to the plurality of limbs. But instead of referring to the legs as in the riddle text, Creon refers to the hands, which in the riddle, as a matter of fact, are the two complementary legs when the infant walks on four. Such a reference can hardly be accidental in this context.

After Teiresias has denounced Oedipus publicly, the Chorus reflects on the accusations raised in words clearly alluding to the formulation of the original riddle as well:

Who is he of whom the divine voice from the Delphian rock hath spoken as
having wrought with red hands horrors that no tongue can tell? It is time
that he ply in flight a foot stronger than the feet of storm-swift steeds. (463–
469)

The voice referred to is not human but belongs to the oracle, and the four-legged creature is no weak infant as in the riddle but a strong animal. The voice and the legs have been fragmented by the Chorus into different spheres of existence, divine and animal, which are both in different ways opposed to the human sphere. In the riddle of the Sphinx, however, the essence of man is defined by bringing the divine voice and the multiple animal legs together. A complex struggle between Oedipus, the man, and the Sphinx/monster is developed in Sophocles' text and its intertexts. Both the Sphinx and the riddle seem to be one and unambiguous, but they are both actually in constant flux. Oedipus, on the other hand, has had different, and even contradictory identities, for example two sets of parents. The unfolding plot, however, shows that he is really one.

In addition to this complex game of directly confronting the different spheres of being in the riddle text, there is, in the words of the Chorus, a direct reference to man as the being who is one foot stronger than the feet of the steeds. This, I suppose, has something to do with the use of human cunning and reason. It also builds up a complex irony, because Oedipus was given an additional "foot" when he was placed in the wilderness of Cytheiron with his heels pierced together with a pole. This pole has not made him stronger, however, as the Chorus seems to indicate ("a foot stronger"), but rather transformed him into a helpless victim of the cruel oracular logic executed by his parents.

In addition to the direct textual evidence, the opposition between the one and the many expressed by the riddle echoes one of the most central themes in ancient Greek philosophy: the flux of the material world stands in a constant dialectic with the attempt to find the unifying philosophical or metaphysical principle of existence. The opposition between Parmenides' "one" and Heraclitus's understanding of constant flux is a clear example of this. Plato's metaphysics, where the oneness of the idea transcends the multiple appearances of the material world, is perhaps the most elegant philosophical formulation in the Greek world of thought bridging this dialectical gap. In the seventh book of his *Republic*, Plato claims that the process of thought itself is aroused by this apparent contradiction of the one and the many:

For if simple unity could be adequately perceived by the sight or by any other sense, then, . . . there would be nothing to attract towards being, but when there is some contradiction always present, and one is the reverse of one and involves the conception of plurality, then thoughts

begin to be aroused within us, and the soul perplexed and wanton to arrive at a decision asks 'What is absolute unity?'⁷

According to Plato, when true knowledge has been reached, the opposition between the one and the many is supposedly given an unambiguous rational formulation—as opposed to the multivalent quality of the poetic and the enigmatic texts.

The philosophical and the dramatic discourses are both related to the riddle of the Sphinx. The riddle, apart from dealing with the dialectics between the one and the many, is actually a poetic formulation of one of the most fundamental issues in any philosophical system: the essential nature of man. What is, the Sphinx asks, the nature of man? With Aristotle's discussion of different kinds of definitions in *Analytica Posteriora*, it is evident that the philosopher has crossed the border of strictly rational discourse and entered into the ludic landscape of riddling. In his discussion about definition by division, a procedure which Aristotle actually opposes, he gives the following example: "Thus to the question 'What is the essential nature of man?' the divider replies 'Animal, mortal, footed, biped, wingless.'"⁸ This almost absurd riddle definition of man as a "wingless mortal biped" does at least partially function intertextually with the riddle of the Sphinx. Still, this definition of man concentrates on his bipedality as a kind of "telos" or realization of his essence, perhaps in order to stop the flux of constant transformations (the number of legs) which the riddle tries to capture in its more poetic and enigmatic mode of expression.

That man lacks wings does give Aristotle's definition a slightly enigmatic character however, in particular if we consider the fact that, in opposition to man, birds always have two legs, at least after they have hatched, while man, at least according to the riddle of the Sphinx, does not. In *Topica*, Aristotle argues that "since it is a property of man to be a 'walking biped' it could also be a property of a bird to be a 'flying biped.'"⁹ It seems that Aristotle is also aware of the riddle of the Sphinx and the notion of the transformation of the number of legs, when in the same context he claims that "'biped' could not be a property of man, for not every man is possessed of two feet."¹⁰ He does not, however, develop this idea. But the fact that the Sphinx is a four-legged, winged creature complicates the matter even further.

There are no doubt many other texts that are relevant in this context, and I shall refer to some in the following analysis. It may perhaps be appropriate to end the discussion here with the riddle from Plato's *Republic* referred to in the motto. Socrates is talking about individual objects which are like a riddle because they have a double sense and are always ambiguously perceived. To exemplify his idea, he refers to the "children's puzzle about the eunuch aiming at the bat, with what he hit him . . . and upon what the bat was sitting."¹¹ This is referred to by the Scholiast as having the following wording, where the first three questions are directly relevant to the semantic fields activated by the riddle of the Sphinx and the Oedipal drama:

A man who was not a man—a eunuch
seeing and not seeing—seeing imperfectly
a bird that was not a bird—a bat
perched on a bough that was not a bough—a reed
pelted and did not pelt it—aimed at it and missed
with a stone that was not a stone—pumice-stone.¹²

The sense that the riddle of the Sphinx has more than one answer, and that once an answer has been found it is necessary to search for a new one (as opposed to philosophical discourse searching for the truth), expresses the flux and processuality emphasized by the riddle text: that which has one name and one voice has many outward forms. This principle of change in relation to something seemingly constant can also be transferred to the riddle text itself: one text with many meanings. The ambivalence and semantic multivalence of the riddle text actually remains even after Oedipus has found the solution that leads to the throne of Thebes and to Jocasta's bed. In this respect, the riddle of the Sphinx, at least in its larger mythical and narrative contexts, differs from the general norm of the literary riddle which usually, once it has been solved, no longer continues to be a riddle but is transformed into a "poem" or poetic text where the answer to the initial riddle now serves as its title.¹³

The structure and meanings of the riddle of the Sphinx in the larger context of Sophocles' play simultaneously unfold in a number of different directions. Through his answer to the riddle, Oedipus himself becomes a multivalent human being; the inner logic of the riddle—the logic of flux and transformation as opposed to the single voice—becomes applicable to himself. As his mother's husband, Oedipus is placed in two social systems which, because of the incest taboo, are mutually exclusive. Because of the social norms, he is actually placed in two mutually exclusive "semantic" slots at the same time. Seen in this perspective, Oedipus has more than one appearance; as a human being he is more complex than he seems: he has undergone fragmentation into several entities. Even at any isolated point in time he is always embedded in a perceptive flux.

Furthermore, the fact that solutions to riddles are only temporary is a central feature of Sophocles' own text. If there seems to be one answer to the riddle, such a reading of Oedipus's triumph overlooks not only his downfall but also the fact that ambiguity and multivalence constitute the very essence of Sophocles' dramatic text and its manifold dramatic ironies. As the play opens, Oedipus, who has "solved" one riddle in the past, is challenged with a new "riddle"—who killed Laius? According to the oracle, only when this question is answered will the plague harassing the city of Thebes be alleviated. This, of course, is the same oracle which not only placed the curse on Oedipus but also told Creon that the man who solves the riddle of the Sphinx will take over the kingdom and marry the widow queen. Several significant similarities are established between the plague in the opening of Sophocles' play and the previous situation where the Sphinx threatened the city. In both cases, Creon consults the oracle about the causes for unnatural events. Also, in both cases, it is Oedipus who is able to give the answer to the riddles, in the first case by providing the universal concept "man," which places him on the throne of the city and in his mother's bed, and in the second with the particular first-person singular "I" as the murderer, which leads to his expulsion. "Oedipus/I" is the answer to the second riddle, referring to himself through the deixis as the speaker as well as subject of the discourse. Oedipus is actually the one-voiced creature whose own voice pronounces himself as the answer to the second riddle. Or as Knox has formulated this process of *anagnorisis*, of acquiring knowledge, in Oedipus's case, the "answer to the riddle once found will equate him not to the foreigner who saved Thebes from the Sphinx but to the native-born king, the son of Laius and Jocasta."¹⁴

Sophocles' text constantly refers to Oedipus's triumph over the Sphinx in terms that evoke the semantic contexts of the riddle itself. Thus in his argument with Teiresias, Oedipus claims that "yet the riddle, at least, was not for the first comer to read; there was need of a seer's skill; and none such thou wast found to have, either by help of birds, or as known from any god: no, I came, I, Oedipus the ignorant, and made her mute, when I had seized the answer by my wit, untaught of birds" (393–398). The voice of the "stubborn songstress" (36), the winged Sphinx herself, becomes muted—that is, she loses her *voice* through Oedipus's use of his. Oedipus also claims that he had no recourse to the kind of divination given through birds, who are winged just like the Sphinx.

The riddling-situations of the Sphinx on the one hand, and the plague in Thebes with which Sophocles' play opens on the other, can also be seen as part of a power struggle between Creon and Oedipus. According to Apollodorus, in the first instance, Creon has lost his own son and has to give up the power to Oedipus, who solves the riddle. In the second move of the narrative, the one constituting Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Creon regains power by having Oedipus answer the riddle of his own identity, leading to the discovery that he has both killed his father and married his mother. In both cases, the riddling situation is related to upset father-son relations, developing a subtext simultaneously leading in several directions concerning the relationship between knowledge and the struggle for power and authority. In the first instance knowledge led to power, whereas in the second the knowledge of the self led to the total loss of Oedipus's authority.

Jean-Pierre Vernant has extended the borders of the riddle structure in *Oedipus Tyrannus* even further by arguing that the hero constitutes by himself a riddle whose meaning he will guess only by discovering himself in every respect the opposite of what he believed himself and seemed to be.¹⁵ Vernant goes on to claim that it is the human condition which is like a riddle because, in Oedipus's case, it invites two opposite interpretations—one high and divine in the beginning of the play, and one low, nihilistic, and empty of meaning at the end of the play, when Oedipus's real identity has been discovered. Vernant even goes on to construct an additional riddle, the play itself, in which he finds that, exactly according to Aristotle's definition of the riddle genre, two irreconcilable terms are joined together. According to Vernant, the positive divine king becomes his opposite, a *pharmakos* who is transformed into a sacrificial scapegoat. This also reflects the basic structure of the tragic fall, where happiness and nobility are turned into their opposites.

All these riddles that are generated from the initial riddle have one goal: to point at Oedipus as the individual who has realized the words of the oracle. He is, to use a narrative structure emphasized in Christian thought, that man—*ecce homo*—selected as the scapegoat as well as the "word become flesh," the oracle come true or realized in the body of Oedipus. Sophocles' play contains a complex network of riddles, all of which lead to Oedipus and to his body (body become word). The riddle of the Sphinx focusing on the legs and the voice as a universal concept of "man" has been transformed into the quest for the particular individual who killed Laius. This riddle can only be answered by pointing at a particular individual—Oedipus. Only when he has been singled out will the city be saved from the plague. In the Christian drama, on the other hand, transubstantiation transforms the body from the sphere of the

particular individual to a universal symbol enabling the universal salvation of mankind through the body of Christ. In the Christian “drama,” not just the legs of the scapegoat hero but his hands as well have been pierced. The wounded limbs are apparently necessary for the solution of the existential riddle, regardless of whether this leads to damnation or salvation.

Finally, Oedipus’s own body becomes the riddle which he has to look at, interpret, and solve. In particular, we have to pay attention to the ways in which his feet have been inscribed in the Sophoclean text. Let us start with his name: Oedipus—“swollen foot.” Several critics have pointed out that Oedipus is the man with the swollen (*oidos*) foot who knows (*oida*) how to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. Oedipus, whose name is based on the meaning of “foot,” has solved the foot-riddle of the Sphinx. His name, according to Knox, “emphasizes the physical blemish which scars the body of the splendid tyrannos, a defect which he tries to forget but which reminds us of the outcast child this tyrannos once was and the outcast man he is soon to be.”¹⁶ But in spite of the fact that Oedipus himself, who is the first speaker in the play, uses his own name already in its eighth line, he never asks why he has this name or why (as we may assume by this name) he has swollen feet, or at least must suffer from some kind of blemish or scar on them. Not even when Jocasta mentions that the baby born to her and Laius was exposed with pinned feet on the mountain of Cythairon (716–719) does Oedipus look down at his own feet. And the woman who is his wife has apparently not wondered how he got his name—which she, who is also his mother, did not give him—nor, if such is the case, why he has scarred or swollen feet. The riddle of the Sphinx, which he has solved, focuses on the feet of man as a universal concept: Oedipus’s name focuses on his own individual fate and his own disfigured feet. But Oedipus, the famous solver of riddles, does not “look” down at his own feet until the very end in order to make the fatal connection between his name and his body.

Oedipus’s failure to look at himself—his feet and his name—in order to solve the riddle of his own identity is connected with both his metaphorical blindness, which after the painful discovery is willfully transformed into real physical blindness, and his problematic status as a human being, as someone who has broken some of the most significant social taboos. A short passage in Plato’s *Cratylus*, where the etymology of the word “man” (*anthropos*) is discussed, throws further light on the connection between the act of looking and the concept of “man”: “The name ‘man’ implies that the other animals never examine, or consider, or look up at what they see, but that man not only sees but that he considers and looks up at that which he sees, and hence he alone of all the animals is rightly called man (*anthropos*) because he looks up at what he has seen.”¹⁷ To be a man means to reflect on that which is seen on the basis of which a human consciousness develops. Oedipus’s inability to look, to see, and to consider implies that he does not pass the borderline from the nonhuman to the human world until it is too late for him to integrate his gaze into a self-conscious creative activity.

Claude Lévi-Strauss has added another aspect to this complex intertextuality through his analysis of the connection between Oedipus’s scarred feet and his mythical (nonhuman) origins. Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that the names of Oedipus’s fatherline—Labdakos (Laius’s father), which means lame; Laius, which means left-sided,

as well as Oedipus's own name—"all refer to difficulties in walking straight and standing upright."¹⁸ He goes on to claim that myths relating to men born from the earth refer to problems of walking, and this particular myth "has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous, to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman."¹⁹ In mythical terms, this means that for somebody not born from human parents there is no possibility of incest. The autochthonous hero, because he is not really human, never runs the risk of marrying his mother. Oedipus with his swollen feet behaved as if he did not really include himself in the answer he gave to the riddle. Rather, he considered himself to be a kind of hybrid mythic creature like the Sphinx.

On the basis of this discussion, it is now possible to consider more directly some of the alternative answers to the riddle. In the myth we do not learn what solutions were given by all those who had to pay with their lives for their mistake. One such possible alternative, which is implied by Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipal myth, would consider *beast* or *monster* as a possible answer. The fact that a mixture between a woman and a monstrous beast—the Sphinx—asked the riddle further emphasizes the distinctions made in the myth between human (man) and beast. The numerous legs mentioned in the riddle could belong to some monstrous creature instead of being a condensation of the ages of man. This answer brings out the possibility that when the beast becomes aware of the flow of time and gains a historical consciousness, it becomes transformed into a human being. When all the feet are perceived simultaneously, the beastly dimension is foregrounded; when they are extended in time, as a proto-historical consciousness, the human dimension takes over. That Oedipus answered "man" and not only saved himself and the city of Thebes but also became king in his own hometown and married the queen, his mother, is given an additional ironic twist by the distinction between man and beast. In order to achieve the status to which he was legally entitled, the crown of his native town, he killed his father and slept with his mother; he behaved like an animal, actually rejecting his human, biological origin. This upsets the social dimension of his human identity and transforms him into a monstrous creature.

Aristophanes' explanation of Eros, the power bringing men and women together, in Plato's *Symposium*, is also relevant in this context. According to Aristophanes, there were originally three sexes: man, woman, and the union between them, which was the "original" version of man, called Androgynos.

[This] primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely alike; also four ears, two privy members and the remainder to correspond. He would walk upright as men now do, backwards or forwards as he pleased, and he could also roll over and over at a great pace turning his four hands and his four feet, eight in all like tumblers going over and over with their legs in the air.²⁰

To humble their pride, Zeus decided to divide these creatures and to diminish their strength and increase their numbers, which will "have the advantage of making them more profitable." He goes on to threaten that "they shall walk upright on two legs, and if they continue insolent and will not be quiet, I will split them again and they

shall hop about on a single leg.”²¹ Human desire, of course, is based on “reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man.”²²

This description, involving a mythical transformation of the number of legs, actually leads to another “mistaken” or alternative solution to the riddle of the Sphinx. This solution has to be considered with great caution, but it gives a very vivid image of the mysterious transformation of the legs and the fact that “human beings,” in the words of Lévi-Strauss quoted earlier, “are actually born from the union of man and woman.” This is furthermore the feature of his own identity about which Oedipus is fundamentally mistaken in thinking, on the social level, that his real parents are from Corinth and, in mythical terms, that he is an autochthonous creature—or perhaps that his mother is his missing half, according to the myth told by Aristophanes. This perception of his mother as his missing half in fact contains a deep truth, because birth is actually a separation and a division where the number of legs increases, albeit not according to the scheme developed by Aristophanes.

If we take the transformation of the number of legs very literally, what we see is sexual intercourse between man and woman. During the union itself there are four legs, while afterward there is a division into the two legs of the woman, and the three—the two legs and the sexual organ—of the man. Seen from this perspective, the riddle constitutes a symbolic reenactment of the primal scene.²³ Sophocles’ drama exposes the real origin of Oedipus from the sexual union of his two parents. This origin has been cursed by the oracle. The riddle, if it is given this solution, shows Oedipus where his real physical origins are, though he is not able to discover them until it is too late. Oedipus fails to make the connection between his own name, the presumed scars on his feet, and what his mother/wife Jocasta tells him about the birth of her and Laius’s child. In the context of the solution of the riddle as a primal scene with the male sexual organ as a possible “third” leg, the fact that Oedipus fails to look down at his own feet could also imply his failure to cope with some aspect of his own sexuality.

There are still more possibilities for pursuing solutions to the riddle of the Sphinx. As mentioned, it emphasizes the temporal/historical dimension of human life and gives a structural logic to the ages of man, like Jacques in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, who divides man’s life into seven ages.²⁴ The notion of the different ages of man presented by the riddle is also present in Sophocles’ play in the opening lines of the priest of Zeus: “Nay, Oedipus, ruler of my land, thou seest of what years we are who beset thy altars,—some, nestlings still too tender for far flights, some bowed with age, priests, as I of Zeus, and these, the chosen youth” (14–19). Here the stages of man are made concrete not in temporal or developmental terms, but as the social texture of Thebes in crisis. Of course, it is worth noting that the image used for the young children, who are “still too young for far flights,” is that of the winged creature.

The riddle of the Sphinx can also be given an interpretation that disregards both the temporal and social perspectives. By marrying his own mother, Oedipus has brought together his childhood and his maturity to one single point in time. He is both son and husband to Jocasta, as well as father and brother to his children. This, argues Rudnytsky, “causes him to replicate in his own person not only the tripartite form of the Sphinx’s riddle, but also the ‘two species’ of the Sphinx herself.”²⁵ This answer compresses the three ages of man—son/husband/father—into one single

moment in time, instead of seeing each age clearly separated from the others through the use of a specific number of legs (as the developmental model would have it). By bringing all of the ages together, Oedipus upsets the developmental and social concepts of man that are brought out by the correct “official” answer to the riddle of the Sphinx.

The final issue I want to take up is the way Oedipus’s discovery of his own identity has been given concrete literary form by Sophocles. As mentioned, this discovery constitutes an ironic shift from the universal concept “man” to the particular “I” where Oedipus looks down at his own feet. How does Sophocles’ text handle this shift? After Oedipus has been accused by Teiresias for being the cause of the plague because he has murdered Laius, Jocasta tries to calm him:

An oracle came to Laius once . . . that the doom should overtake him to die by the hand of his child who should spring from him and me. Now Laius,—as, at least the rumour saith,—was murdered one day by foreign robbers at a place where three highways meet. And the child’s birth was not three days past, when Laius pinned its ankles together, and had it thrown, by others’ hands on a trackless mountain. (711–720)

From this she draws the conclusion that the oracle has not been realized and thus Oedipus has no reason to fear that he is the murderer. By pinning the ankles of the newborn child together Laius actually added a third leg, realizing an aspect of the riddle, which in Oedipus’s solution belongs to old age, when man needs a staff. This third “leg” will symbolically obstruct Oedipus from walking normally even when it is removed. And the fact that the place where the three highways meet and Oedipus’s three legs are brought together in this passage emphasizes both the connection between his body and his actions and the importance of exact numerical values in the text.²⁶

Jocasta’s description of the exposure of her child clearly has a strong effect on Oedipus, and he expresses his deep anxiety, the cause of which he does not understand until the whole secret of his identity has been revealed. Oedipus exclaims: “What restlessness of soul, lady, what tumult of my mind hath just come upon me since I heard thee speak!” (726–727). Jocasta immediately asks Oedipus the reason for these feelings, and in his response he makes a very important decision which, though it will not change the final outcome, certainly influences the manner in which his discovery is made. On the basis of Jocasta’s explanation, there could be at least two direct causes for Oedipus’s anxiety: the circumstances of the murder—its location and the number of murderers—and the fact that the child of Jocasta and Laius, who had been prophesied by the oracle as the murderer of his father, had been placed on a “trackless mountain” with his ankles pinned together. At this point, Oedipus can choose between two different locations in order to find a cause for his restlessness: the “place where three highways meet” and the “trackless mountain.” These two locations are diametrically opposed. The road crossing indirectly points at the possibility of moving with the use of legs as Oedipus did, or with a carriage, as Laius did. It is also the place on which he can walk on his feet, as opposed to the trackless mountain which is an impasse, a place without exit. But Oedipus does not look down at his own scarred feet that connect him to the trackless mountain, which can only be crossed with painful efforts, and instead he says to Jocasta: “Methought I heard from

thee,—that Laius was slain where the three highways meet” (728–730). Sophocles’ text significantly makes Oedipus overlook his feet, by turning to the road crossing and not to the mountain of Cythairon. On the symbolic level he is at this point still expressing his future blindness, as he has done on several previous occasions. He fails to see and to respond to the signals of his own body.

In the investigation that follows, Oedipus concentrates on the issue of whether Laius was killed by one or several murderers. Since Oedipus must know that he was alone while fleeing from what he thought was the fate of the Delphian oracle and killing an unknown traveler, this is definitely an important point in the text where the opposition between the one and the many is brought out most forcefully. Furthermore, when Oedipus meets the herdsman who was present at the scene of the murder and finally has a chance to confirm the crucial question concerning the number of murderers in order to solve the mystery with absolute certainty, he does not ask him this question. Instead, he pursues the other line of investigation, the one he very clearly abandoned before, concerning his origins and how he was found on the mountain of Cythairon. The reason for this change in Oedipus’s strategy is that just before this the messenger from Corinth announcing the death of Polybus has traced his origins to Cythairon, where he himself found Oedipus with his feet pierced and clamped together.

At this point, the signs on his body can no longer be denied or repressed, or, as Oedipus himself still unknowingly says to Jocasta, “It must not be that with such clues in my grasp, I should fail to bring my birth to light” (1058–1059). Jocasta has at this point realized to whom she is talking; she has realized, too, that Oedipus will soon also be able to solve the riddle of his identity. The clues lead directly to what Aristotle in his *Poetics* called *anagnorisis*: recognition or discovery. For Jocasta, who rushes into the palace to take her life, this recognition has already occurred. But Oedipus even at this point fails to make the full connection between the clues given about the newborn child whose ankles were pinned together and his own body as he perceives it at the moment of the dramatic action. He still fails to look down at his feet in order to identify himself.

A closer look at chapter 16 of the *Poetics* shows that Aristotle has also failed fully to look down at the scarred feet of Oedipus. Among the kinds of recognition he enumerates in this chapter, the least artistic, “which poets mainly use through the poverty of their imagination” are “external signs” such as birthmarks and what Aristotle himself calls “characteristics that we acquire after birth . . . found on the body, for example, scars.”²⁷ The examples of scars Aristotle mentions are the two instances when Odysseus is “recognized through his scar in one way by the nurse and in another by the swineheads.”²⁸ Of course, it is interesting to note that Odysseus’s scar is also situated on his foot. The significant difference between Homer’s and Sophocles’ use of scars in their respective texts is that in the former the discovery is made by the people surrounding Odysseus, while the hero himself knows who he is. Oedipus, on the other hand, has to discover his own identity.

It is quite puzzling, however, that in Aristotle’s treatise on tragedy, where Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* serves as the prime example of excellence, the scars on Oedipus’s feet are not even mentioned—in particular, since these scarred feet and the feet of the riddle are actually, together with the oracle, the prime “movers” of the

text. For Aristotle, intellectual forms of discovery and recognition are superior to the kinds of recognition based on physical marks on the body. But no matter how rational Oedipus's final solution to the riddle of his own identity is, it is ultimately based on the recognition of the meaning of his name and of his body. Aristotle's preference can be traced to his almost complete disregard of the physical aspects, the *opsis*, of the theatrical performance. It must be said in Aristotle's defense, however, that Oedipus arrives at the actual recognition of his identity not through the scars on his feet, as the nurse and the swineherds do in Odysseus's case, but through an intellectual process that includes an awareness of his body and its significance. This would be a total *anagnorisis*, like the meaning of the Hebrew word *yada* which in the biblical story of Adam and Eve entails both carnal and spiritual knowledge.

This textual awareness of the body and the way the human body is inscribed in the riddle, in Sophocles' play and its related intertexts, are, I think, also the point where my analysis connects with our modern performance tradition and its theory. The understanding that the dramatic text is a riddle that has to be given a new interpretation every time it is embodied in a theatrical production on the stage has become one of the most important preconditions of our own performance tradition. It is based on the notion that every text has many different solutions, and that every such solution is an embodiment in the literal sense of the word, just as the different solutions to the riddle of the Sphinx place the body of Oedipus in different contexts. Furthermore, the idea that one solution enables new productions and new interpretations to develop in constant interaction with previous ones has become so strongly integrated in our contemporary performance aesthetics that it is now simply taken for granted.

The final chorus of Sophocles' play, somehow directed at the spectators in the theatre, also carries a sense of this performative aspect of Oedipus's fate which ends when he leaves the stage:

Dwellers in our native Thebes, behold, this is Oedipus, who knew the famed riddle, and was a man most mighty; on whose fortunes what citizen did not gaze with envy? Behold into what a stormy sea of dread trouble he hath come! Therefore, while our eyes wait to see the destined final day, we must call no one happy who is of mortal race, until he hath crossed life's border, free of pain. (1524–1530)

The spectators still see an individual whose aching body will continue to haunt him, like a plague, until he crosses the border of death.

Notes

1. Apollodorus 1967: 347ff.
2. Sophocles 1914: 1:442. All quotations are from this edition of *Oedipus Tyrannos* unless otherwise indicated, and the line numbers will be given in the text itself.
3. Apollodorus 1967. For an opposite view, see Edmunds 1983, who claims that the "Sphinx is a secondary element in the Oedipus legend" (147) and that "it is not clear why it must be this riddle and not some other" (148).
4. Athenaeus 1961: 4:569.
5. Euripides 1988: 61. This is also the formulation quoted by Jebb (Sophocles 1914: 6) and Segal 1981: 214 and 454, note 20.
6. Line 845 as translated in Goodhart 1978: 56. The translation given by Jebb is somewhat less pointed: "If then, he still speaks, as before, of several, I was not the slayer: a soli-

tary man could not be held the same with that band" (844–845). In his notes, however, Jebb gives "one cannot be made to tally with (cannot be identified with) those many" (Sophocles 1914: 114, note).

7. Plato 1937: 1:758 (*Republic*, 524).

8. Aristotle 1928: 1:91b,40–92a,1–2.

9. *Ibid.*, 136b, 8–9.

10. *Ibid.*, 134a, 12–14.

11. Plato 1937: 1 (*Republic*, 479).

12. See Adam and Reeds 1965: 1:343 and Cornford 1955: 188.

13. Pagis 1986: 55–60; see also this volume.

14. Knox 1957: 150.

15. Vernant 1978: 477.

16. Knox 1988: 9.

17. Plato 1937: 1:189 (*Cratylus* 399c 1–6).

18. Lévi-Strauss 1963: 211.

19. *Ibid.*, 212.

20. Plato 1937: 1:316.

21. *Ibid.*, 317.

22. *Ibid.*, 317–318.

23. Roheim 1974: 8.

24. See Chew 1948: 157–182.

25. Rudnytsky 1987: 265. Also Vernant 1978.

26. It is also possible to view the crawling child with its pinned ankles as having five legs. These options, however, as far as I have been able to discern, are not developed in Sophocles' text or its intertexts. Note also that the child is three days old.

27. Aristotle 1968: 27.

28. *Ibid.*, 28. In his commentary Hardison has suggested that this chapter is a later addition to Aristotle's thought (214).

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16

Myth as Enigma: Cultural Hermeneutics in Late Antiquity

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In memoriam Jonas C. Greenfield

Must the gods mean what they say? The question runs like Ariadne's thread throughout Greek culture. Set in the frame of the centuries-long reflection on the ambivalent nature of religious language, this question bears upon conceptions of truth and its expression in the ancient world. Plutarch quotes a well-known saying of Heraclitus, "to the effect that the Lord whose prophetic shrine is at Delphi neither tells nor conceals, but indicates."¹ The god's answer is not clearly expressed, but only hinted at, and its understanding requires an interpretative effort. Greek philosophers and grammarians had strived, since the fifth century B.C. at least, to make sense of their religious and cultural tradition, to interpret it. Their need to interpret (*hermeneuein*) the Homeric myths stemmed from the intellectual impossibility to accept these myths at their face value.

This effort intensified under the Empire, however, when thinkers living in a world in deep transition had developed a keen and new interest in religious topics. Hence, the interpretations of myth by these thinkers and their understanding of the nature of religious language represent a major aspect of their attempt to reclaim the Hellenic legacy. Their understanding of myths as riddles (*ainigmata*) is the topic of the following pages. *Prima facie*, myth and enigma would seem to be poles apart. While the myth is a story told in detail, usually publicly, and in words clear to all, the riddle or enigma hides as much as it reveals, alluding to the truth rather than telling it.²

This traditional approach had gained added urgency from the second to the fourth centuries C.E., when the Hellenic tradition was competing more and more with the fast-growing sophistication of Christian hermeneutics. The hermeneutics developed around the myths of old was profoundly different in its goals—although not always in its means—from the exegesis of Holy Scriptures in Judaism or in Christianity. The

very concept of Scripture established on divine revelation is quite alien to Greek culture and religion. The hermeneutical effort of late antique thinkers has been well analyzed in various studies. Suffice here to mention those of Jean Pépin and Robert Lamberton.³ The key concept of *ainigma*, however, and its semantic evolution, do not seem to have received due attention.

In classical definitions, *ainigma* (the word means “riddle”) referred exclusively to a literary trope. “The very nature of a riddle (*ainigma*) is this, to describe a fact in an impossible combination of names,” wrote Aristotle.⁴ This definition and its literary connotations were echoed by Quintilian when he defined *ainigma* as *allegoria*, *quae est obscurior*.⁵

I shall seek here to review some of the evidence for a much broader meaning of *ainigma*. I intend to show how the identification of myth as enigma enabled late antique thinkers to see myths as early expressions of a basically ambivalent truth, which retained its essential meaning at different levels of understanding. Such a conception of truth reflects an elitist attitude, the relationships of which with both political power and language should also be noted.

We might begin with an important but rather underestimated text of Plutarch, which offers a fascinating reflection on the radical transformations of Greek culture from its early stages.⁶ The text, which covers chapters 24 to 26 of the *Oracles at Delphi*,⁷ begins with considerations on the nature of speech (*logos*), the value of which, like that of currency, evolves with time. The argument, developed in Plutarch’s dialogue by Theon,⁸ aims to show that this change, willed by divine providence, has been for the better. His is an optimistic view of cultural transformations in history. In early times, he writes:

Men used as the coinage of speech verses and tunes and songs, and reduced to poetic and musical form all history and philosophy and, in a word, every experience and action that required a mere impressive utterance. This aptitude for poetry, rare nowadays, was then shared by most people, who expressed themselves through lyre and song, using myths and proverbs (*muthois kai paroimiais*), and besides composed hymns, prayers, and paeans in honour of the gods in verse and music. . . . Accordingly, the god did not begrudge to the art of prophecy adornment and pleasing grace, even providing visions.⁹

At some point, however, “life took on a change along with the change in men’s fortunes and their natures; usage banished the superfluous (*to peritton*).” In a surprisingly modern fashion, Plutarch insists that the transformation was originally of a cultural nature, reflecting a change in ways of life and economic behavior. People began to dress and adorn themselves more soberly, “rating as decorative the plain and simple rather than the ornate and elaborate.” According to him, this cultural transformation was also felt on the linguistic level: “So, as language also underwent a change and put off its finery, history descended from its vehicle of versification, and went on foot in prose, whereby the truth was mostly sifted from the fabulous.”¹⁰

In an analysis that is strongly reminiscent of Giambattista Vico’s perception of the relationships between myth and poetry in the *Scienza Nuova*, Plutarch presents the mutation as entailing a change in patterns of thought: whereas the poetic style was well fitted for the telling of tales (*muthoi*), prose, leaving out all ornaments, takes away “the mythical” or the fabulous, and retains only the kernel, unadorned truth, *a-lêtheia*, which is now revealed, or dis-covered.

Philosophy, too, was transformed, when philosophers opted for the unequivocal character of common language and abandoned the vagueness of poetic style: "Philosophy welcomed clearness and teachability in preference to creating amazement [*to ekplêton*], and pursued its investigations through the medium of everyday language [*dia logôn*]."

The birth of a new kind of philosophy, conceived as an effort of intellectual honesty and simplicity, was directly related to the emergence of prose as the common way of expression. Language was also affected by such a dramatic change. Heralded by Apollo himself, the new age also meant the end of metaphor:

The god put an end to having his prophetic priestess call her own citizens "fire-blazers," the Spartans "snake-devourers," men "mountain-roamers," and rivers "mountain-engorgers." . . . When he had taken away from the oracles epic versification, strange words, circumlocutions, and vagueness, he had thus made them ready to talk to his consultants as the laws talk to states, or as kings meet with common people, or as pupils listen to teachers, since he adapted the language to what was intelligible and convincing.

Yet, the most important consequence of the transformation of language occurred in the field of knowledge, in particular of religious knowledge: "The introduction of clearness was attended also by a revolution in belief, which underwent a change along with everything else."¹¹

Thus, according to Plutarch, the transformation of language entailed a radical change in the very conception of religion. This religious revolution meant disenchantment with all strange, uncanny, or grandiloquent expressions, which had been considered in the past as so many manifestations of divine power. Now religious truth must also be expressed in clear and simple prose:

As a result, people blamed the poetic language with which the oracles were clothed, not only for obstructing the understanding of these in their true meaning and for combining vagueness and obscurity with the communication, but already they were coming to look with suspicion upon metaphors, riddles and ambiguous statements,¹² feeling that these were secluded nooks of refuge devised for furtive withdrawal and retreat for him that should err in his prophecy.

In other words, Plutarch claims here that in the religious world of the high empire—and in contradistinction with early times—the deliberate use of high style and various forms of polyvalent or metonymic expressions all too often hid fraud. He mentions "the tribe of wandering soothsayers and rogues that practiced their charlatanry about the shrines of the Great Mother and of Sarapis." It is these prophets, according to Plutarch, "that most filled the poetic art with disrepute."¹³

But religious charlatans, despite their high visibility, should not be considered the main cause of the general discontent with poetic style. This lies, rather, in the cultural changes which brought men to "banish the superfluous" and to "adorn themselves with economy"—again, changes approved by Plutarch.

Moving to the political level, Plutarch speculates on another reason for the ambiguity of classical religious language, or, as he puts it, the "need of double entendre [*diploès tinos*], indirect statement and vagueness for the people of ancient days." Assuredly, the god at Delphi could not lie, but he did not want to reveal too much, through the oracle, to greedy rulers who would have misused knowledge of future events in their waging of unjust wars.

Hence, the obvious solution was that the god should speak through the oracle—that is to say, in a vague and ambiguous language. Only the wise leaders would understand the message precisely, while it would remain opaque for the less philosophically-minded rulers. Thus the god

is not willing to keep the truth unrevealed, but he caused the manifestation of it to be deflected, like a ray of light, in the medium of poetry, where it submits to many reflections and undergoes subdivisions, and thus he did away with its repellent harshness. There were naturally some things which it was well that despots should fail to understand and enemies should not learn beforehand. About these, therefore, he put a cloak of intimations and ambiguities which conceals the communication¹⁴ so far as others were concerned, but did not escape the persons involved nor mislead those that had need to know and who gave their minds to the matter.

This analysis of the political reasons for the ambiguity in divine revelation refers to what we would probably call esotericism: divine oracles, presented in enigmatic garb, hide as much as they reveal. We are back at the saying of Heraclitus with which we began: in the old days, the god neither told nor concealed, but indicated. The close connections of the modes of expressing the truth with forms of political power—those analyzed by Leo Strauss and Michel Foucault—are here clearly recognizable. But those early days have passed for good, and we should not regret them, concludes Plutarch:

Therefore anyone is very foolish who, now that conditions have become different, complains and makes unwarranted indictment if the god feels that he must no longer help us in the same way, but in a different way. Nowadays, history has found ways [through its use of prose] to sift facts [‘truth’] from legend [‘myths’], while philosophy has learned to avoid grandiloquence and to seek precision and communicability.

Plutarch refers here to the consequences of a radical cultural transformation, which has left a cognitive dissonance of sorts, a gap in the relationship of intellectuals in the Roman empire to their classical heritage. The discrepancy between two conceptual worlds is felt now in a much stronger sense than in the classical times. It is only through hermeneutics that it can be mediated. In that sense, the civilization of the empire, particularly in late antiquity, can be called a civilization of hermeneutics: the sense of distance from the cultural past is matched by the urge to relate to its fundamental classical documents—that is to say, mainly, the Homeric poems and the works of the early philosophers.

For later Greek intellectuals, the writings of the wise authors must express truth, although in quite different ways from the Jewish and Christian scriptures. If such truth is not apparent to us, it must be looked for on a deeper level: this is the task of the *homo interpretes*. Attempts to speak in enigmas or other ambiguous ways are suspect today, but we must understand that in previous times these were perfectly legitimate. The role of the modern-day philosophers is precisely to interpret these pithy sayings of old and to translate their meaning, as it were, into clear, unambiguous prose. In any case, a rational person, who understands the nature of enigmas and other kinds of indirect discourse, should not attempt to revive the old days. Both his social role and his patterns of thought are conceived of as radically different from those of the priests of old. The treatise ends with the following paragraph:

But, just as in those days there were people who complained of the obliquity and vagueness of the oracles, so today there are people who make an unwarranted indictment against their extreme simplicity. Such an attitude of mind is altogether puerile and silly. It is a fact that children take more delight and satisfaction in seeing rainbows, haloes, and comets than in seeing moon and sun; and so these persons yearn for the riddles, allegories, and metaphors which are but reflections of the prophetic art when it acts upon a human imagination.¹⁵

The basic conceptions which this remarkable text develops at some length are reflected elsewhere in Plutarch's writings. For him, it is on purpose that the wise men of old used to hide their scientific knowledge under the cloak of myths. This is why their writings usually appear like a mysterious theology, the secret of which is protected by riddles and hidden meanings (*di' ainigmatôn kai huponoión epikrûphos*), in which what is pronounced is clearer for the crowd than what remains unsaid, but what is kept silent is deeper than what is pronounced.¹⁶ Such a method, of at once unveiling and veiling, Plutarch finds "in the Orphic poems, in Egyptian and Phrygian legends, and especially in the liturgies of initiation to the mysteries and the symbolic rites of sacrifices."¹⁷

In another passage, he insists on the purposefulness of such an esoteric theology. In the days of old, the sages, who knew the true nature of the gods and of their transformations under changing conditions, and feared this nature might be misunderstood by the people, gave different names to the god in its various forms (such as Apollo or Phoebos), "since they wanted to hide these truths from the crowd."¹⁸ Here, the esotericism is more traditional in nature than the one referred to above. The deeper meaning of truth (be it religious or philosophical) is reserved for the elite, since its inevitable misapprehension by simple folks entails serious danger. This danger is double: both for the unprepared hearer of truth and for him who proffers it. It is in this last sense that Numenius, for instance, referred to "the secrets of Plato."¹⁹

Now this ancient and secret wisdom, far from having been only a Hellenic phenomenon, crossed the boundary between Greeks and Barbarians. Among Barbarians, the Egyptians hold a place of honor: they placed sphinxes in front of their temples "to indicate that their religious teaching (*theologia*) has in it an enigmatical sort of wisdom."²⁰

Similarly, the hieroglyphs retain a secret symbolism, and they deeply influenced "the wisest among the Greeks": "Pythagoras, in particular, enjoying a mutual admiration with these people, imitated their symbolism and mysterious manner, interspersing his teaching with riddles."²¹ One should note that although *ainigma* is much used in this context, other words, such as *huponoia* or *allegoria*, carry a very close or even identical meaning, for, according to Plutarch, "by the means of what the ancients called 'hidden thoughts,' and which are known today under the name of 'allegories,' one has tried to do violence to Homer's stories and to change their sense."²²

Plutarch's attitude, as we have seen in the long passage from the Oracles at Delphi, is one of historical optimism. The evolution of mores and the parallel transformation of patterns of thought works all for the best. In the "disenchanted" (*entzaubert*, to use Weberian terminology) modern world (i.e., of his own days), people think more clearly, that is to say more properly than they used to in former times. This faith in the progress of reason throughout history, however, was not shared by all late antique thinkers. A strikingly different attitude to the cultural transformation is reflected

by Maximus of Tyre, a second-century eclectic Platonist philosopher. Like Plutarch, Maximus is deeply interested in religious questions and shares his analysis of the drastic change that occurred in modern philosophy: "As it closely examined myths and could not suffer enigmas,²³ the soul freed philosophy from the veils that adorned it and used naked speech."

Although Maximus' diagnosis of the phenomena is identical to that of Plutarch, his evaluation of modern philosophy is clearly different in that it expresses much skepticism as to the value of the contemporary interpretation of myths:

Everything is full of enigmas, with the poets as with the philosophers; the modesty with which they cover truth seems to me preferable to the direct language of modern writers. In questions unclear to human weakness, myth is indeed a more honorable interpreter.²⁴ If our contemporaries have reached deeper in contemplation than their predecessors, I congratulate them. If, however, without passing them in knowledge, they have exchanged the riddles of their forefathers for transparent myths, I fear lest they be accused of revealing secret discourses.²⁵

Both Plutarch and Maximus, however different their reactions to cultural transformations might be, have in common the same historical consciousness, shaped by the recognition of their own belatedness. For both of them, riddles refer to traditional and esoteric ways of expressing truth.

Various authors show a similar understanding of the cultural past. I will refer here to some texts that appear to be paradigmatic. Strabo, around the beginning of the Christian era, reflects the Stoic attitude to myths and to their relationships with riddles: "Every discussion of the gods is built upon the examination of opinions and myths, since the ancients hinted at [*ainittomenôn tôn palaion*] their physical perceptions about things and always added a mythic element to their discussions. It is not an easy thing to solve all the riddles correctly, but the whole mass of mythically expressed material is placed before you."²⁶ R. Lamberton calls this "fascinating passage" a "capsule summary" of the Stoic conception of theology that had its roots in the fourth and third centuries B.C. According to Strabo, the ancients did not express their opinions directly and openly, but clothed them in riddles and myths, that is, in an indirect language which calls for interpretation.

The same opinion is held by Pausanias, in a revealing passage which Paul Veyne has analyzed at length in his thought-provoking book on the belief in myths in ancient Greece: "In the days of old those Greeks who were considered wise spoke their sayings not straight out but in enigmas."²⁷ Veyne singled out Pausanias as a particularly interesting example of those late antique Greek intellectuals who combined a critical attitude to myths with the traditional respect shown toward both gods and oracles.²⁸ This is best exemplified by the conception of riddles reflected in our texts. The myth is described as an *ainigma* only when it cannot be understood and believed as it is, taken at its face value. We can thus assume that while the myth looks absurd *prima facie*, it carries in fact a deep but hidden meaning, which only proper interpretation can reveal.

According to this conception, truth (*alêtheia*)²⁹ is to be searched for and discovered in order to be revealed, but this revelation must of necessity remain ambiguous, hiding even as it unveils. This attitude toward truth was more properly that of the prophet (*mantis*) than that of the philosopher in classical times, a fact noted anew by

Michel Foucault.³⁰ It became commonly accepted in late antiquity by Neoplatonic philosophers, who conceived their task, in seeking the deepest levels of truth, as more religious than epistemic in nature. Like priests, as it were, they attempted to crack the enigmas in which religious truth was clothed and hidden.

For Plotinus, religious mysteries, as well as myths, allude to intellectual realities. Thus the mysteries and the myths about the gods “say riddingly” (*ainittontai*) that Kronos, the wisest of the gods, shuts up again within himself that which he has produced before the birth of Zeus.³¹ One must pierce the enigma, Plotinus tells us, just as “the wise priest understands the enigma (*to ainigma sunieis*), and, arriving there, reaches a real contemplation of the sanctuary.”³² In a similar way, he interprets the ithyphallic Hermes as the representation of an enigma: “I believe that this is what the ancient wise wanted to say in their mysteries: representing the old Hermes with a constantly active generating member.”³³

Porphry, more systematically than his teacher Plotinus, devoted much effort to his search for the true, philosophical meaning of religious language. His most clearly developed statement on the matter is to be found in his *Commentary on the Cave of the Nymphs*, where he seeks to investigate Homer’s “enigma,” i.e., his hidden philosophical intentions and spiritual reference, when describing the cave of the nymphs in the *Odyssey*.³⁴ Elsewhere he writes:

What Homer says about Circe contains an amazing view of things that concern the soul. He says:³⁵

“Their heads and voices, their bristles and their bodies
Were those of pigs, but their minds were solid, as before.”

Clearly, this myth is an enigma [*esti toinun ho muthos ainigma*], concerning what Pythagoras and Plato have said about the soul.³⁶

Porphry’s investigations are based on the belief that, as he states in the *Philosophy of Oracles*, “the gods have not revealed anything about themselves in a clear way, but only through enigmas.” Hence, for Porphyry as well as for Plotinus or Plutarch, the philosopher cracks the divine code in his interpretation of enigmas.³⁷ In a sense, the philosopher’s role is very similar to that of the priest, but the latter also sought to preserve the ambiguity that he was revealing. For Plutarch, as we have seen, the philosopher must strive to suppress all ambiguity.

Other texts exhibit a rather different trend. The implicit identification of the philosopher’s role to that of a priest is also found among the late Neoplatonists, who insist, more than most earlier thinkers, on the religious context of myths. Proclus, for instance, says that “initiations use myths so as to keep hidden the ineffable truth about the gods.”³⁸ He explicitly states that for him, the philosopher’s task is similar to that of the wise priest: like the latter, the philosopher is an interpreter (*hermeneus*) in lower—and clearer, less ambiguous—language of that which was expressed more densely in the Homeric myths. “According to the secret doctrine” (*kata tèn aporrhêtôn theôrian*), he claims, the way the gods behave in Homer’s works must be interpreted, rather than understood at its face value, and hence should not be regarded as offensive.³⁹

The dialectical relationship between the revealed and the hidden, which according to this conception is a main characteristic of myth, is also referred to by Sallustius,

Julian's Neoplatonic mentor. A most pregnant and radical metaphor appears in his treatise *On the Gods and the World*: "The universe itself can be called a myth [*exesti gar kai ton kosmon muthon eipein*], since bodies and material objects are apparent in it, while souls and intellects are concealed."⁴⁰

The world is a myth: the phrase is reminiscent of another metaphor, "all the world's a stage" (*skènè pas ho bios*), a metaphor also known to Maximus of Tyre.⁴¹ Yet the novelty of the metaphor should not be ignored. If myth has grown to take cosmic dimensions, the cosmos itself, object of the philosopher's investigations, has become identified with a myth, or rather an enigma, to be deciphered through the help of the clues given by its revealed parts. The philosopher, according to such a conception, becomes an interpreter, an intellectual priest, or *theourgós* of sorts. It then does not come as a surprise to find similar ideas about the *arcana naturae* from the pen of Iamblichus:

Just as nature has in a way set the stamp of invisible thoughts in visible objects⁴² . . . just like myth, nature conceals in the same extent that it reveals, and just like myth, its deep kernel has to be retrieved through the correct understanding of various hints [*ainigmata*]. Some of these hints are provided, for instance, by the statues of the gods.⁴³

Sallustius points out that there are various kinds of myths: theological, physical, psychical, material, and of mixed nature. Of all these, only the theological myths, which deal with the very essence of the gods, allude directly to the divine.⁴⁴

In the same context, Sallustius offers a justification of esotericism not encountered before: "Furthermore, to wish to teach all men the truth about the gods causes the foolish to despise, because they cannot learn, and the good to be slothful, whereas to conceal the truth by myths prevents the former from despising philosophy and compels the latter to study it."⁴⁵ New is the insistence on the double character of esotericism. Whereas mythical stories satisfy the foolish, to whom philosophical truth would seem meaningless, quite the contrary is true for the good: it is precisely because myth strikes them as unconvincing or meaningless that it forces philosophical reflection upon them. In other words, it is the very absurdity of myth that triggers rational thought.

This conception is developed further by the emperor Julian. Julian's starting point is the intellectual and ethical scandal represented by so many myths about the gods. Hence, only the belief that they should be interpreted, and not understood *au pied de la lettre*, can save them: "Accordingly, unless everyone [*sic*] of these legends is a myth that involves some secret interpretation [*muthos ekhôn theôrian aporrhêton*], as I indeed believe, they are filled with many blasphemous sayings about God."⁴⁶

At once a Neoplatonist philosopher and a religious renovator, Julian seems to have been interested in myths and their interpretation.⁴⁷ If the myths are unbelievable as they stand, while they also reflect the deepest truth about the deity, their shocking character must be purposeful. Hence, we must reach the conclusion that "the wise men of the past" (*hoi palaioi*), when they discovered the original meanings of things (with the help of the gods), "clothed them in paradoxical myths (*muthois paradoxois*) in order that, by means of the paradox and the incongruity (*hina dia tou paradoxou kai apemphainontos*), the fiction might be detected and we might be induced to search

out the truth." Indeed, it is by such riddles as these (*dia men tôn ainigmatôn*) that the wise man is reminded that he must search out their meaning.⁴⁸

The most impressive text dealing with the topic, however, is found in Julian's Oration VII: "To the Cynic Heracleios: how a Cynic ought to behave and whether it is proper for him to compose myths." To my mind, the Oration constitutes one of the most interesting discussions of the relationships between myth and philosophy to have reached us from antiquity. Oddly enough, its importance does not seem to have been widely recognized.

After noting, like Plutarch, that myths seem to be originally the invention of men given to pastoral pursuits and playing both the flute and the lyre (206a), Julian asks what kinds of myths ought to be invented, and what parts of philosophy are interested in myths. Myth, he answers, can be employed or composed "only by practical philosophy, which deals with the individual man, and by that department of theology which has to do with initiation and the Mysteries. . . . For Nature loves to hide her secrets," he adds, referring to Heraclitus's saying, "and she does not suffer the hidden truth about the essential nature of the gods to be flung in naked words to the ears of the profane" (216b ff).

Myths are written for childish souls, as Plato says (*Phaedrus*, 251), and with the development of mythical expression, poets invented a new literary genre, the fable with a moral, or *ainos*.⁴⁹ In myth, the poet, who aims at moral exhortation and instruction, conceals this goal by not speaking openly (*phanorôs*). He acts in this way from fear of alienating his hearers (207a).

But for those who do not belong to the multitude, and who can receive truth in its purest form, it is precisely the paradoxical and incongruous element (*apemphainon*) always present in myths that guides toward the truth (216c–d). Hence, "I mean that the more paradoxical and prodigious the enigma is, the more it seems to warn us not to believe simply the bare words but rather to study diligently the hidden truth" (217c). And later: "Whenever myths on sacred subjects are incongruous in thought, by that very fact they cry aloud, as it were, and summon us not to believe them literally [*mè pisteuein haplôs*] but to study and track down their hidden meaning."⁵⁰ Julian adds that myths expressing "incongruous" thoughts about the gods are permitted only on the condition that their language remain "wholly dignified" (*semna khrè panu ta rhēmata einai*). It was in such strong terms that the last pagan emperor reaffirmed a long tradition of cultural hermeneutics in the Hellenic world. Thanks to this tradition, he was able to feel close to Homer and to Aesop, and to accept the Heracleitan saying as a major postulate of his epistemology.

More than any other Hellenic thinker, Julian insisted on the virtue of paradox and on its importance in the search for religious truth. Now the most famous justification of paradox in late antiquity is probably Tertullian's establishment of faith on the rational inacceptability of its content.⁵¹ This is not the place to analyze it. Suffice it to point out that it is set on a level quite different from Julian's own praise of absurdity. For the Christian thinker, the paradox does not hide a deeper meaning, and does by no means indicate, even in an allusive way, its own falseness. The gap between Tertullian's *absurdum* and Julian's *apemphainon* is indicative of the Christian radical break with the Hellenic hermeneutical tradition. As I have argued in "Moses' Riddles," it is not only the content of the myths—that is, both the shocking stories

themselves and their esoteric and philosophical interpretation—that the Fathers rejected, but also their linguistic form, the “high language” in which they were expressed and which was inherent in the whole hermeneutic attitude of Hellenic thinkers.⁵²

Erich Auerbach has offered a remarkable analysis of a new literary genre which appeared in Christian antiquity, the *sermo humilis*, a single popular level of expression of even the highest thought, which ought to be understood by all and sundry.⁵³ This *sermo humilis*, fundamentally different from the late antique Hellenic interpretation of myths (*semna rhēmata*), became an essential element of the new culture which crystallized in late antiquity and was to become the backbone of medieval Christian culture.

Notes

I wish to thank Robert Lamberton and Charles Kahn for agreeing to read a draft of this paper and making a number of judicious and important remarks.

1. *oute legei, oute kruptei, alla sèmainei* (*De Pyth*, or. 21, 404e; fragment 93 Diels). Heraclitus was known in antiquity as a propounder of obscure riddles. Indeed, some of the fragments are actually riddles. See for instance Plato, *Theaetetus*, 179e; cf. Kirk and Raven 1957: 182–184. Plutarch also refers to Pythagoras as one who makes use of riddles; see *Moralia* 12d; 672e: *De Iside et Osiride*, chap. 10, 354e. On the god speaking in riddles, see Plato, *Apol.*, 21b: *ti pote legei ho theos, kai ti pote ainittetai?* This essay is part of a wider study. See Stroumsa 1996.

2. Various studies have pointed out the probable original connections between myths and riddles in antiquity. See in particular Jolles 1930: 106, 114–115.

3. Pépin 1976; Lamberton 1986. Both works are extremely important for our purpose.

4. *Poetics*, 22, 1458a 26; cf. *Rhetoric*, 3.2.12, 1405ab; *metaphorai gar ainittontai*.

5. *Inst.* 8.6.52; cf. Cicero, *de or.* 3.42.

6. For the background of Plutarch as a *Kulturkritik*, the classical study remains Decharme 1904. On Plutarch's own religious thought, see Vernière 1977 and Brenck 1977. See also Flacelière 1974: 273–280. These works do not deal directly with the topic of the present study, however.

7. *De Pythiae oraculis* 406b–407f. In the following paragraphs I quote the translation of Babbitt 1936: 5:324–335.

8. Although Theon's words might well reflect here adequately Plutarch's own views, it is of course impossible to claim this with certainty.

9. Cf. *On the Fame of the Athenians*, 348a: “That poetry concerns itself with the composition of mythological matters Plato has also stated” (Babbitt 1936: 5:506–508).

10. *malista tou muthôdous apekrithè to alêthes*. Ibid., 406e.

11. *meta de tès saphêneias kai hê pistis houtôs estrepheto summetaballousa tois allois pragmasin*. Ibid., 407a.

12. *all' èdè kai tas metaphoras kai ta ainigmata kai tas amphibolias*. Ibid. 407a–b.

13. Ibid., 407c.

14. *toutois oun periebalen huponaiais kai amphilogias apokruptousai to phrazomenon*. Ibid. 407e.

15. *kai houtoi ta ainigmata kai tas allêgorias kai tas metaphoras tès mantikès, anaklaseis ousas pros to thnèton kai phantastikon, epipothousi*. Ibid., 30(409c); Babbitt 1936: 5:342–345.

16. *Ex opere de Daedalis Plataeensis* 1 [Bernardakis: Vol. 7, 43.3–13]; the text is quoted by Pépin 1976: 184.

17. Robert Lamberton calls my attention to the fact that it is extremely unlikely that Plutarch speaks here in his own voice, referring me to F. H. Sandbach's comments in Plutarch's *Moralia*: 15:282–283.

18. *Kruptomenoi de tous pollous hoi sophôteroi*; *De E Delphico*, 9. = 388F, cf. 2a, 2c, 6a.

19. *Peri tôn Platoni aporrhêtôn*; Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangeica*, 13.4–5. According to Numenius (Fragments 24.57–64), it is for political reasons that Plato's writings were deliberately coded. See Lamberton 1986: 62–63, 73.

20. *ainigmatôdè sophian*, *De Iside et Osiride* 9.354c.

21. *Is. Osir.* 10. 354e.

22. *De Audiendis Poetis* 7. 419e: *palai men huponoiais, allêgoriais de nun legomenais.*" See Pépin 1976: 87–88. On "allegory" in Plutarch, see Griffiths 1970: 419 (on chap. 32).

23. *tous muthous diereunômenè kai ouk anekhimenè tôn ainigmatôn. Philosophumena* (4.3; 44.1–7 Holbein; see Pépin 1976: 187).

24. *euskhèmonesteros hermeneus ho muthos.*

25. *Philosophumena*. 4.5.

26. *Geography* 10.3.23. 474, quoted (but mistranslated) by Goldschmidt 1950: 22, and Lamberton 1986: 26–27. Text in Strabo, *Geography*, 7:82–83 ed. F. Lasserre, cf. 136, no. 6.

27. *Hellênôn tous nomizomenous sophous di' ainigmatôn palai kai ouk ek tou eutheos legein tous logous . . . Description of Greece*, 8.8.3 Cf. Veyne 1983: 24, cf. 41 and 42, no. 48 on enigmas.

28. *Ibid.*, 108.

29. On the semantics of the word in ancient Greek literature, see for instance Bultmann: 1:232–251.

30. Foucault dealt with the topic in his very last lecture course. See Flynn 1988: 102–118, esp. 104.

31. *Enn.* 5.1.7.27ff.

32. *Enn.* 6.9.11.25–30 and 43–45.

33. *Enn.* 3.6.19.25–41.

34. *De Antro Nympharum*, 21; I use Westerlink et al. 1969.

35. *Odyssey*: 10.239–240.

36. *Apud Stobaeus, Ecl.* 1.41.60, quoted by Lamberton 1986: 118. Lamberton writes on this passage: "The claim that the Homeric passage itself is an *ainigma* is finally unimportant. Porphyry elaborates his account in the manner of Plotinus, exploiting the myths and language of Homer to communicate abstract truths" (Lamberton 1986: 119).

37. Robert Lamberton, however, calls my attention to the facts that "for Plutarch, the hermeneutic problems he loves are essentially and necessarily insoluble" and that "very little of Plotinus' philosophical work involved interpretation."

38. *In Rempublicam* 2.108 Knoll. The text is quoted by Vernière 1977: 338, no. 2.

39. See esp. *In Rempubl.* 1.44.14; 66.7; 73.15; 74.19; 159.15; 2.248.27. The references are given by Lamberton 1986: 169, 195, 214.

40. *De diis et mundo* 3; 4.9 Nock.

41. *Dialexeis* 7.10.

42. *De Myst.* 7.1 and parallel passages, quoted by Nock 1926: xlv and no. 29.

43. *De diis et mundo* 6; 12.10 Nock; as is well known, the sphinxes in front of the Egyptian temples were widely perceived in this light by Greek thinkers. Clement of Alexandria, in particular, dwells on the issue in his *Stromateis*. These texts are analyzed in Stroumsa 1992. It would be interesting to investigate the possible connections of this perception with the Augustinian concept of the 'traces' of God in the world.

44. *De diis et mundo* 4; 4.21–25 Nock.
45. *Ibid.*, 3; 4.11–15 Nock.
46. *Against the Galileans*, 94a; 3:326–327 Loeb Classical Library.
47. Iamblicheans, on the contrary, seem to take surprisingly little interest in myths (R. Lamberton).
48. *Oration* 5: “Hymn to the Mother of the Gods.” L.C.L. I; 170a–c.).
49. On the early development of the ainos, see G. Nagy 1988.
50. *to lelèthos*, 222c; I am quoting according to the text and translation in volume 2 of the L.C.L. edition, here pp. 118–119.
51. Tertullian, *de Carne Christi*, 5. Tertullian does not use the lapidary formula attributed to him, *credo, quia absurdum*.
52. See n. 43 *supra*.
53. E. Auerbach 1965.

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17

Squaring the Circle

ILAN AMIT

Mathematical problems differ from traditional riddles in a number of ways. Some of these differences are discussed in the first section of this chapter. The second section deals with the phenomenon of mathematical problems that seem to migrate out of their original domain and into the general culture. Some common features between logical-mathematical problems and traditional narratives are associated with self-reference and the separation of levels. These are discussed in the third section.

The Scientific Problem and the Traditional Riddle

I know something, which you do not know. I wish to capitalize on it. If I impart my knowledge, I shall lose the advantage; if I do not, you will be unaware that I possess it. I could pose a riddle, in the hope of creating in you a sense of deficiency and a need to redress it. By posing the riddle I establish my status as a knower. Eventually, I will have to surrender my knowledge and solve the riddle. If I do not, something else might distract your attention, or someone might arrive at the solution independently.

In the traditional context, the riddle and its solution are posed orally. Every listener becomes a new potential knower, who can restart the process on his own. The riddle spreads and its inventor is forgotten. The transmission process also serves as a control mechanism: Is the original solution right? Are there additional solutions? Can the riddle be better phrased? These questions and others are repeatedly considered. This is perhaps why “new” riddles are suspect in traditional societies.

One distinction between the scientific problem and the traditional riddle lies in the transmission process. Scientific problems and solutions are normally transmitted as articles in scientific journals. This is assumed to be a one-shot process, which casts the knowledge into the public domain. Repeated transmission becomes irrelevant. The traditional control mechanism cannot function and is replaced by refereeing.

Along with the riddle that calls for a definite answer, tradition also comprises enigmatic questions that do not have an accepted response: “What is man that Thou

rememberest him?" (Psalms 8:5); "Who is the god to whom we sacrifice?" (*Rgveda* 10); "What advantage does man gain from all the toil that he will toil under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:3). We do not take these to be riddles, and they are not rhetorical questions that elicit no answer because the answer is self-evident. They are, rather, eternal puzzles that torment the human consciousness.

The tension between an answer-oriented and a problem-oriented question also exists in science. *How to Solve It* is the title of a famous book by the Hungarian mathematician G. Polya, who examines the thought processes mathematicians undergo in solving problems. There is something active and aggressive about this title: a problem exists in order to be attacked and solved.

A different impression emerges from another scientific title by the German physicist E. Schroedinger: *What Is Life?* We have a hunch that even after reading the book, we will still be puzzled by what life is. The eminent author chose a title that seems to accentuate the eternal enigma. The content lies on the borderline of science and mysticism. The book concludes that we must possess the ability to manipulate the electrons in our brains by our force of will.

In science, the two attitudes might apply to the same problem. The sequence of prime numbers, such as 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, . . . cannot be exhausted, nor can it be specified in constructive terms; still, mathematicians continue to devise methods for discovering new prime numbers, in spite of the fact that this task is inexhaustible.

The number 6 is divisible by 1, 2, and 3, and by no other number less than 6. The sum of these divisors makes 6, the original number. This quality is rare. The number 10 is divisible only by 1, 2, and 5, which add up to 8, not 10. The ancient Greeks saw in 6 a "perfect" number, while 10 was to them imperfect. The next perfect number after 6 is 28. The next is 496. These perfect numbers are even. We know the general structure of perfect even numbers and how to generate them. No odd perfect number has ever been found, and the question of its existence is still open 2000 years after the ancient Greek philosophers.

An unsolved mathematical problem has nothing that distinguishes it from a problem that is soluble. Indeed, once a mathematical problem is *proved* to be insoluble, it becomes closed, much like a solved problem. Thus the distinction between open, unsolved problems and the ones that are soluble is purely empirical: problems that resist solution long enough are classified as unsolved. Some of them are nevertheless solved later, despite the former classification. The same is not true in the traditional context. The distinction between "Who is the God to whom we offer sacrifices?" and "Who is born and does not move?" is not empirical. The two seemingly similar questions have quite different cultural functions. The first is an ever-present distress; the second, a mere pastime.

Euclid based geometry on a small number of definitions and axioms, from which it is possible to derive all "true" geometrical assertions. We take them to be true, because the axioms, definitions, and derivation process seem to us natural, true, almost self-evident. Still, one axiom raised some doubt. Centuries of mathematicians tried to do without it or to replace it by another, more self-evident one.

The axiom in question is the fifth, which asserts that, given a line and a point outside it, there exists another unique line which passes through the point and does not intersect the original line. This unique line is said to be *parallel* to the original.

Mathematics took 2,000 years to prove that this axiom is indeed independent of the others. It can be replaced by some variant, but cannot simply be omitted without seriously hampering the development of geometry.

One possible variant is to assert that any external line will intersect the original one (no parallels). Another is to assume that a whole pencil of lines through the given point does not intersect the original line (infinitely many parallels). Any variant, together with the remaining definitions and axioms, generates a different geometry. In Euclid's original geometry, the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180° . In a geometry without parallels it is greater than 180° . If infinitely many parallels exist, the sum is less than 180° .

How are we to choose between the alternative geometries? They cannot hold simultaneously in the same world, in which "line," "point," and "plane" have a fixed meaning. We may ask which of them holds in our physical universe, given our intuitive understanding of the basic terms. The general theory of relativity shows that any one of the three geometries may be consistent with the physical universe and that the question we have asked—Which is the one that is really true?—depends on the energy density of the universe.

The big bang theory predicts that if the energy density of the universe is such that the sum of the angles in a triangle exceeds 180° , then the universe will expand forever, ultimately losing any internal structure. If it is such that the sum is less than 180° , the expansion will ultimately stop, and the universe will then contract, perhaps to a single point, which might possibly explode in a new big bang. If the energy density corresponds to a geometry in which the sum is exactly 180° , the universe may approach a state of dynamic equilibrium.

Concern for the ultimate fate of the universe thus lends special weight to the puzzle of the triangle. It becomes a sort of a neck riddle, where much, perhaps your life, is at stake. The great nineteenth-century mathematician F. Gauss made some measurements between three distant peaks. Modern astronomers have reached beyond our planet and made measurements to distant constellations. If the results deviated significantly from 180° , they would decide the problem, at least for our universe. Actually, the results read 180° to within a very small error. The universe stands a good chance, but its fate cannot be guaranteed.

I confess: the analogy between a neck riddle and the question of the energy density of the universe was made in jest. The risk associated with a neck riddle is usually exogenous: it is created by a king, a demon, a giant or a witch, not by the riddle itself. This is obviously not the case for the physical gambit of the three alternative geometries.

Migration of Mathematical Problems

Renaissance mathematicians kept their secrets in order to win at riddling competitions. Today there are no mathematical secrets and thus no mathematical riddles, properly speaking. Some mathematical problems, solved or unsolved, somehow migrate into the common language and into culture at large. This section discusses some instances, without attempting a comprehensive characterization.

A rich man died. He left his herd of 21 camels to his three sons. The senior was to receive half of the herd, plus one camel. The second—half of the remaining camels, plus one. The junior—half of the rest, again plus one. The sons were unable to carry out this will and consulted a renowned Sheikh. He showed them a way. What was it?

This is an example of a mathematical riddle. It is mathematical, because a certain capacity to manipulate numbers is required in order to figure out or verify an answer. It is a riddle, because it has already been solved, probably long ago: the Sheikh provided an additional camel, which made the division possible. A single camel remained at the end—the Sheikh's.

One is puzzled by this solution, despite its seeming efficacy. Is it in accordance with the will? Was that what the father had in mind? Perhaps he made the will when the herd was smaller, and the partition could be carried out. If so, what was the original size?

This riddle has an “esoteric” interpretation. The Sheikh made possible the execution of the will by providing something, which survived intact. If he would have truly had to invest his camel in the process, he could have helped only a few. But the way he acted provided exemplary wisdom for the many. This “enzymatic” quality distinguishes the Sheikh as a teacher or master, who is able to transmit by participating without participation.

We will now consider two cases of unsolved mathematical problems, one which arose recently and another which is 350 years old. Neither of them migrated into the general culture, nor have they acquired an esoteric interpretation. Nevertheless, they shed more light on what an unsolved mathematical problem is. We have already encountered two other unsolved problems in the previous section: the discovery of new primes and the existence of odd perfect numbers. We could not make qualitative distinctions among unsolved mathematical problems on the basis of these examples alone, however.

Construct a sequence of integers (whole numbers) as follows: Start with any positive integer. If it is even, make the next its half. If it is odd, say x , make the next equal to $3x + 1$. Continue in the same manner, until you reach the cycle 4, 2, 1, 4, 2, 1, . . . Will you always reach it?

This is known as the $3x + 1$ problem. It seems to have originated in the 1960s, circulating unofficially at mathematical conferences. Computer programs verified the eventual termination of the sequence in the required cycle for any initial positive integer up to very large numbers. The general answer is still unknown.

If $3x + 1$ is replaced by $3x - 1$, there are a number of terminal cycles (e.g., 1, 2, 1, 2, . . . or 5, 14, 7, 20, 10, 5, . . .). If it is replaced by $2x + 1$, the sequence may grow without bounds (e.g., 1, 3, 7, 15, . . .). How does $3x + 1$ avoid these pitfalls?

The problem acquired a certain notoriety, because young mathematicians who devoted time and effort to its solution always ended up disappointed. No auxiliary or interim results of interest were obtained. Consequently, the $3x + 1$ problem would be classified at present as both difficult and unfruitful.

Another unsolved problem had a different fate:

Show that $x^n + y^n = z^n$ has no integer solutions x , y , and z , for integer exponents $n \geq 3$.

This is probably the most prestigious unsolved problem in mathematics. It is named after the French mathematician Fermat, who wrote in 1637, on the margin of a book he was reading, that he had found a truly remarkable proof, but did not have enough margin to record it there.

For $n = 2$, solutions do exist—e.g., $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$, $5^2 + 12^2 = 13^2$. In fact, there are infinitely many such solutions, as was recognized by the Pythagoreans.

The ceaseless effort to verify Fermat's claim, or to produce a counterexample, resulted in the establishment of some of the most fruitful branches of modern mathematics. Yet it failed to settle the problem. A recent effort by a Japanese mathematician working in Germany received considerable publicity, but was finally unsuccessful. Most mathematicians believe that Fermat's original proof was also wrong.¹

Despite its prestige, Fermat's problem did not migrate out of the domain of mathematics—perhaps because it is not transparent enough in ordinary language, perhaps because it lacks imaginative content. Thus the mathematical "weight" of an unsolved problem does not seem to determine its wider cultural repercussions.

What then makes it possible for a mathematical problem to acquire a wider cultural significance? One possibility seems to stem from its hold over the imagination, which is often independent of its actual mathematical meaning. We might consider the problem of squaring of the circle as an instance of this class. Other possibilities will be dealt with later.

The following three problems occupied Greek mathematicians, who were unable to solve them in their narrow sense. The second and the third are mentioned in the first book of Euclid's *Elements*:

- to square a given circle
- to double a given cube (the Delphic altar)
- to trisect a given angle

The exact meaning of these problems is not immediately clear. To do something geometrically meant, in ancient Greece, to perform it by means of an unmarked ruler and a compass. This is the narrow sense of the three problems. Thus the first requires the geometrical construction of a square, equal in area to a given circle. The second requires the construction of a cube, double in volume relative to a given cube. The third requires the partitioning of a given angle, which is neither right nor flat, into three equal angles. All these tasks were shown to be impossible in the nineteenth century.

Of the three problems, only the first has migrated into the general language. "To square the circle" means roughly to achieve the impossible. "To double the cube" is meaningless. Why?

The first expression gives rise to imagery, which may be associated with a sense of the impossible. The circle and the square belong, as it were, to two distinct orders. A floor may be tiled by squares, not by circles. A square is easily imagined as a member of a rectangular array, like a checkerboard. A circle is best imagined alone. This is, perhaps, why someone who behaves in accordance with the general line is referred to as "square." A circle, mostly open, represents the infinite in Japanese brush painting. Could it be "squared?"

This imagery is not substantiated by the actual content of the mathematical problem. A parabola is a curve that may be obtained by cutting a cone by a plane, parallel

to its side. A similar cut will yield a circle if made perpendicular to the axis of the cone. Is it possible to square the parabola, or rather a section of it? (The parabola itself extends to infinity.) By association with the former problem, one would tend to reply in the negative. Yet in the Greek sense it may be shown to be possible. A parabola may be squared; a circle may not.

The contest between Achilles and the Tortoise has a paradoxical quality in our culture, because somehow Achilles cannot win. The argument is as follows:

Achilles races the tortoise. Being faster, he starts a mile behind. Before he completes this mile, the tortoise advances some yards. When these are covered, the tortoise is some inches in front. The same will always hold, because until Achilles covers the remaining distance, the tortoise will manage to advance a bit further. Thus he will never be overtaken.

This paradox is due to Zeno, a disciple of Parmenides, who disputed the existence of movement. Aristotle tried to solve it, along with the other paradoxes of Zeno. The complete solution became possible only in the nineteenth century, when it was formally established that an infinite sequence of quantities may add up, or "converge," to a finite quantity.

Take a sheet of paper. Cut it in two. Cut one of the resulting parts in two, and proceed in the same manner. You will obtain an ever growing and unending sequence of pieces of the original sheet, which cannot add up, when pasted together, to more than the original. In much the same way, the time intervals that Achilles needs to overtake the tortoise, though unlimited in number, will add up to a finite interval of time, after which the tortoise will be overtaken.

This paradox is known, at least to literati, outside of mathematics. Though the solution may not be clear to everyone, the gist of the problem probably is. In this respect, it differs from the previous three problems; on the other hand, it does not seem to have acquired a wider meaning or significance, as did the squaring of the circle.

A much deeper relationship between mathematics and culture seems to emerge from the fragmentary heritage of the Pythagoreans. Aristotle ascribes to them the doctrine that "everything is number." Their investigations of the monochord led to the discovery that consonant intervals, such as the octave, the fifth, and the fourth, are based on chord lengths of simple proportions, such as 1:2:3:4. Similar ratios were found in the five perfect solids and were assumed to exist in the world of planets and stars, as well as in the human body. The manifestations of the soul should likewise be harmonious, like the intervals of the code.

Comprehensive doctrines existed before the Pythagoreans and well after them. The Pythagoreans alone, however, seem to have been open, in one sense or another, to the unknown. They searched and discovered new facts after their principles were already set, potentially risking their established beliefs.

In trying to quantify the ratio of the side and the diagonal of a square, the Pythagoreans proved that they are not commensurable. This basic geometrical relationship could not be expressed by the ratio of any two whole numbers, unlike the consonant intervals of a string. Both neo-Pythagorean writers and early commentators on Euclid agree that this is a Pythagorean heritage. The Pythagoreans must have experienced an initial shock. It is said that they kept their discovery secret, but then they also kept everything else secret. According to one tradition (Iamblichus),

the Pythagorean Hippias made the secret public, in breach of his oath. He was drowned in a shipwreck.

Later the Pythagoreans arrived at a wider understanding of numbers, allowing for their incommensurability. Even today, the diagonal of a square of side 1, which has the length of the square root of 2, is said to have an “irrational” length. The Greek term *alogos* might also mean “unutterable.”² There are few examples of mathematical problems in which so much cultural content seems to have been at stake. Ever since the days of the Pythagoreans, ideologists take care to disengage from the unforeseeable, by severing possible ties to scientific issues.

Transgression of Levels

In 1903 the young Bertrand Russell formulated a problem that had a profound impact on logic and mathematics:

Some sets, such as a set of chairs, do not include themselves as members. Others, such as the set of concepts, do. Let X be the set of all sets that do not include themselves as members. Does X include itself or not?

If X were to include itself, it would be outside of X , since X comprises only sets which do not include themselves. If X were not to include itself, it would belong to X , by the same argument. Both possibilities thus lead to a contradiction.

Cantor, the founder of set theory, and Frege, who put logic on a new basis by the calculus of predicates, believed their work to be seriously undermined by Russell's paradox. In its original form, the paradox did not become established in the general culture. Other problems, having certain similar characteristics, did.

A village barber shaves all villagers who do not shave themselves. Does he shave himself or not?

This well-known riddle has the same formal structure as Russell's paradox. What it demonstrates, however, is that a village barber having the said property simply cannot exist. Russell's set of all sets that do not include themselves must be nonexistent too. How is that to be understood?

The difficulties in both cases arise because of self-reference, which is like an index item that points to itself. Yet self-reference is probably the basic attribute of consciousness, since we are conscious of being conscious. At this point, mathematical and logical enigmas touch on the foundations of our being, the question of what it means to be conscious.

“Is false when appended to its quotation” is false when appended to its quotation.

This self-referential sentence is Quine's version of the liar's paradox. In his letter to Titus, Paul states:

Epimenides, the Cretan prophet, said that all Cretans are gluttons and drunkards and liars and cheats.

The sentence, here ascribed to Epimenides, cannot be true, because it comprises the speaker, who is himself a Cretan and consequently a liar, by self-reference. It can,

however, be false, because Epimenides may be a liar, while other Cretans are not. This escape is not possible in Quine's sentence.

The phrase "is false when appended to its quotation" says that the outer phrase in Quine's sentence, and therefore the whole sentence, is false. Thus, if the sentence is true, it must be false. If it is false, then the inner phrase must be true when appended to its quotation. But this is exactly what the sentence does. It follows that if it is false, it must be true. Both possibilities lead to a contradiction. Quine's sentence suffers from a gap in its truth value. It is undecided.

The ability of language to reflect thought and consciousness must be limited because there is a limit to the amount of self-reference that language can tolerate. Quine's sentence lies inside language, but outside this limit.

In his remarkable theorem about undecidable sentences in formal systems, Kurt Goedel showed that a similar construction is possible in any formal system which is strong enough to allow for self-reference. In any such system it is possible to construct a theorem that can be neither proved nor disproved within the system. Such a theorem effectively says of itself that it is unprovable.

By Goedel's theorem, every such formal system is undecidable since it contains problems that cannot be solved within it; thus enigmas will always exist, even where an endeavor is made to rule them out by means of a formal apparatus.

Russell's remedy to the paradoxes of self-reference is contained in his theory of types, to which we shall refer as his theory of levels. According to it, concepts that refer to objects at any level belong themselves to a higher level and cannot consequently refer to themselves. Thus the set of chairs belongs to a level above the one to which the chairs belong. Similarly, the set of English concepts is not itself an English concept such as thought or poetry, but belongs to a new level that consists of English concepts of a higher type. In much the same way, the set of all sets that do not include themselves as members cannot include itself, because it belongs to a higher level, relative to its constituent sets. Other remedies have also been proposed, but most of them can be shown to be equivalent to that of Russell.

"This sentence is false" moves from the level of ordinary sentences to a higher level in which assertions about sentences of the lower level are made. By trying to exist simultaneously at both levels, it gives rise to a paradox. The theory of levels makes such sentences illegitimate, thus ruling out their paradoxical content. Quine's sentence, however, is not ruled out by this mechanism, because it does not explicitly point to itself.

Consider, however, a conversation in which some of the participants blame each other. Someone says: "All previous speakers put the blame on others and failed to consider themselves." Someone else says: "You have done the same just now." "And you?" responds the other. The speakers in this conversation seem to adopt a theory of levels, according to which one is exempt from applying to oneself what one preaches to others. The participants are conscious of the moral objections raised by such a theory when used by others, but fail to apply the same objections to themselves. A theory of levels seems inappropriate in moral circumstances, where self-reference is universally required.

There are other instances in which the transgression of levels, typical of self-reference, seems legitimate. They give rise to the irony of someone shouting at oth-

ers to stop shouting because he cannot stand the noise, or of a sign reading “minde youre spelling.” In other, still similar, circumstances, we are more inclined to respect a separation of levels, as in the case of a coach instructing swimmers though he himself can’t swim; his instructions may still be valid.

In the *Arabian Nights* we hear of Emir Harun Al-Rashid, who became very bored. Nothing could revive his spirits. His storyteller asked: “Do you want to hear the story of Hasan Al-Basri, the mother of all stories, the story that relieves all boredom forever?” “Do you know the story?” asked the emir. The storyteller confessed that he did not, but promised to obtain it for the emir. The emir gave him one year and one day to accomplish the task, on pain of death. The storyteller dispatched his four disciples to the four corners of the world to find the story. They returned within a year, to be questioned by the emir. Each of the first three confessed to having failed to obtain the desired story, but told instead of other stories and adventures he had encountered. The fourth disciple announced that he had found the story.

“There was once an emir who became very bored,” began the disciple. “His storyteller promised to obtain for him the story that relieves all boredom and dispatched his four disciples for the task. Three returned empty handed.”

“You are telling me my own story,” cried the emir angrily. “But wait, how did you know about the others? You were not present when they came back. So perhaps it is a story after all!” The emir became confused. He could not make sense of the situation. The storyteller suggested that he be patient and hear the rest. The emir refused. He ordered dancers and musicians to be brought in, to divert his mind and make him forget the story.

Storytelling normally supposes a strict separation of levels. The storyteller and the audience exist on one level, while the story itself unfolds on another. Here the emir is suddenly projected back and forth between the levels. He finds himself both inside and outside the story at the same time. This transgression is unbearable, because it puts in question his sense of what is real. The self-referential remedy to boredom is perhaps effective, but it is too strong.

Tamil storytellers adopt a similar stratagem, according to A. K. Ramanujan, in order to extricate themselves from their young audience. “An old woman lost her needle when she crossed the river,” begins the storyteller, after a long afternoon of narratives. “Will she find it?” he asks a child in the audience. “No,” replies the child. “And if you say no, will she find it?” asks the man. “No, no,” replies the child. “And if you say no, no, will she find it?” The embarrassed child starts hitting the storyteller in confusion. Thus the evening ends.

Another short south Indian story, narrated by A. K. Ramanujan, tells of a man who was prompted by his wife to go and listen in the evenings to the recounting of the *Rāmāyana*.³ But each night he fell asleep as soon as the recitation began. When this happened for three consecutive nights, his wife scolded him thoroughly and commanded him to stay awake. On the fourth night, the man forced himself to listen. The storyteller described how the king of monkeys, Hanuman, sailed through the air over the ocean as a messenger from Rāma to the captive Sītā. As a sign that Rāma had sent him, Hanuman was carrying Rāma’s ring; unfortunately, the ring suddenly fell into the ocean. The storyteller turned to the audience and asked: “What will Hanuman do now? How can he retrieve the ring? How can he be of help to Rāma

without it?" The man was deeply moved by what he heard. He jumped up, ran to the ocean, plunged in, found the ring, and brought it back to Hanuman. He then returned to his seat and continued to listen.

Despite the obvious analogy between this story and the previous one, they work in different ways. The transgression of levels in the *Arabian Nights* creates a kind of tension that is unbearable to the protagonist and also makes the audience uneasy. In the Tamil story, a similar transgression of levels on the part of the protagonist is performed so naturally and innocently that it comes to be enacted in "reality," at least in the framework of the outer story. One is reminded of Kierkegaard's description of the true believer who, in contrast to the renouncer, believes in the actual realization of his wish in the face of overwhelming odds. In the case of the lost ring, the shock is shifted to the audience, which—unlike the hero of the story—remains suspended somewhere between incredulous laughter and a profound sense of wonder.

Notes

1. When this article went into print, a proof of Fermat's theorem was finally established by Andrew Wiles—a truly masterful achievement.
2. Philip 1966: 200.
3. Oral communication from A. K. Ramanujan; appeared later in 1993: 55–56.

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18

Connecting through Riddles, or The Riddle of Connecting

SHLOMITH COHEN

When first I appear I seem mysterious,
But when I'm explained I am nothing serious.¹

The answer is, of course, "a riddle." In the following discussion I deal with some serious aspects of riddles and riddling that may account for the persistence of this genre across cultures and centuries.

Peter Brooks² has suggested that the most illuminating application of psychoanalytic understanding to literary investigations lies in exploring the text itself, without relating it to particular authors or readers. Following Freud, Brooks sees in a literary work the crystallization of a fantasy that combines a memory of some early experience of a wish with a situation that represents the fulfillment of that wish. Relating his ideas to those of Meredith Skuras, he writes: "I would want to extrapolate . . . an understanding of how phantasy provides a dynamic model of intratextual temporal relations, and their organization according to the plot of wish or desire. We might thus gain an understanding of the interplay of *form and desire*."³

I wish to stress two points in Brooks's view of this issue. First, the literary work provides us with *temporal relations* within a text that may represent an organization of a wish or desire. Organization along temporal lines is expressed in the unfolding of the text in the process of hearing or reading. Second, both *content* and *form* derive their power from a fantasy that is structured to represent a wish and its fulfillment. Uncovering the guiding fantasy may then expand the understanding of the techniques and intricacies that are invested in a particular literary form, in its temporal and structural organization. I have adopted Brooks's assumptions as guidelines in my exploration of riddles.

The riddle is a special instance in the category of questioning; its typical formula is a pairing of a question, or any speech act that has the meaning of a question, with an answer. As in the case of other types of questioning, the question and the answer are divided by two parties: one who formulates the question, and another who is invited to participate in the enactment through offering the answer. Yet here lies

the unique characteristic of the riddle as opposed to other forms of interrogation. In genuine questioning, the questioner seeks some information of which he is ignorant, and which he believes is accessible to the addressee. In the case of the riddle, however, the riddler is in possession of some information which he manipulates the addressee into seeking.⁴ What might motivate such an inverted way of relating information? One may propose two reasons. First, the riddler does not seek new knowledge, but through the exchange of information he establishes a particular relationship with the addressee, which is quite different from other relationships established in other modes of communication. Second, by riddling the riddler actually seeks access to new information, but of a special or different type from what a direct question may provide. In any event, the riddle and the riddling situation are highly constructed and complex creations and deserve exploration of their motivational and cognitive structure. Here I explore the phenomenon of riddling as both an intrapsychic endeavor and a form of communication with another person.

A search through the psychoanalytic literature about riddles confronted me with an unexpected puzzle: there is abundant research on jokes, humor, wit, and other genres of communication and dialogues, but hardly any interest has been given to the riddle as a distinctive mode of expression and relating. Freud did not attend to the issue of riddles directly, but referred to them only for clarification of his ideas about jokes and joke-work.⁵ Similar was the attitude of Kris in his explorations in art.⁶ This was also the case with Wolfenstein's discussion of the development of the sense of humor in children.⁷ In all these instances riddles served as a point of comparison with the phenomena of humor and wit, but their unique characteristics and functions were not discussed in their own right. Why is it that the riddle has been overlooked in the search for expressions of inner life, while jokes have captured so much interest and analytical effort?

The phenomenon of jokes lends itself easily to analysis from the point of view of the economic model of psychoanalytic theory. The release of pleasure (and laughter) in making and hearing of jokes is their most remarkable characteristic. Freud understood this feature as intimately connected to the use of material that is inhibited under most sober circumstances; hence, jokes became examples of the intimate relationship between drives, pleasure, and the unconscious. The joke-work is aimed, according to this analysis, at rendering the inhibition of the drives superfluous, thus allowing discharge of energy by laughter.⁸ Since Freud's account, jokes have remained as an example of the drives' constant activity and wish for discharge, alongside slips of the tongue, dreams, and other phenomena involving the suspension of censorship and reality testing.

Riddles, however, contain other elements in their construction and operation. They are constructed with another person in mind—indeed, they are meant as a challenge to someone else—and what makes them ultimately interactional is the expectation of a specific answer (or failure to answer) from this other.⁹ The presence of the other is an inherent factor in both constructing a riddle and trying to solve it.¹⁰ Even literary riddles that are embedded in written texts, and thus sent out to face an unknown fate, acquire their power by affecting readers and leaving them disquieted until they manage to solve them, as has been beautifully described by Richard Wilbur.¹¹ Hence, from this perspective, the understanding of riddles needs to be

worked out from a model of object-relations, a model that accounts for the relationship between self and other.

Theories of object relation have taken a central place in psychoanalytic thinking during the last half-century. Winnicott, Fairbairn, and Guntrip were some of the main leaders of this development.¹² They introduced a shift in the conceptualization of the basic motivating forces in human behavior and development. Instead of basing all development on the instinctual drives (libido and aggression) and understanding human relations as derived from the drives' attempts at discharge, object-relation theorists saw the human being as primarily object-seeking. In their understanding, sexual and aggressive drives are constructed and experienced in the context of the relationship with another human being that becomes part of the inner life of the self. Normal development depends on a successful integration of instincts and affects with the experience of the relationship with the primary objects, namely the parental figures. The total dependence of early life on parental caretaking gives adaptive primacy to the ways that human beings find to participate in these relationships. This experience is later expanded to all other representations of others, shaping the defensive system and the experience of the self. Hence, the perception of the other outside oneself and the construction of the other within the self become central issues.

Let us look at riddles with these considerations in mind. The phenomenon of riddling appears as a striking example of a very prevalent mode of interaction that is particularly elaborate, in that it challenges the self in the context of challenging another person. The riddle might serve, then, as a promising starting point in the exploration of the relationship between self and other. The present analysis is based on examples of riddles of a wide range of aesthetic sophistication. It also draws some insight from the clinical setting, where construction of riddles became for a moment a pattern of communication between a child and the therapist. In this case, riddling came as a spontaneous gesture in an interpersonal situation that allowed exploration of its subtleties.

In his analysis of the social processes in jokes, Freud presented the interaction concerning jokes as a triangle consisting of a first party—the person who tells the joke; a second party—the person who is the subject of the joke; and a third party—the listener who responds with laughter.¹³ I will adopt this pattern in my discussion of riddles and examine the triangular relations between the constructor of a riddle, the riddle itself, and the listener. For the purpose of the discussion, I treat each of these parties separately.

The Riddlee

Let us start with the listener. After all, we first encounter the phenomenon of the riddle as listeners, and only later in life do we try the more initiatory and creative task of riddle construction.

From the point of view of the listener, the riddle seems an area of curiosity and exploration. A problem is presented in a way that suggests a search for an answer or a solution. Common to riddles and other types of inquiries is the wish to acquire new knowledge and to answer intriguing questions. There is a cognitive aspect to the

response to riddles: in listening to a riddle, the first initiatory reaction is surprise, the confrontation with not knowing. If the gap between what is already known and the novelty that the riddle presents is too small, the riddle will seem trivial and ineffective. If, on the other hand, the gap between what is mastered and the unknown presented by the riddle is beyond the listener's comprehension, the riddle is not perceived at all, and the listener feels that he is facing unintelligible nonsense.

But is solving a riddle equivalent to any other mental activity in the wide category of activities motivated by curiosity, or does it have a distinctive nature? A principal characteristic that differentiates riddles from other types of questions and gaps in understanding is their perception as a challenge. Thus, a riddle is perceived as presented by someone else, be it an actual person or a nonhuman entity, like god or nature, who possesses the correct answer. Interestingly, Freud was very intrigued by the experience of facing riddles early in his psychoanalytic thinking—specifically, the riddle of the Sphinx in the myth of Oedipus and what he formulated as “the central riddle of childhood: where do babies come from?”¹⁴ But he saw them as prototypes of exploration and curiosity and understood them, as such, as motivated by the same libidinal strivings that motivate other activities of exploration. However, he paid no attention to their distinctive characteristic—the seeking of knowledge that is contained by someone else (in the case of Oedipus, the Sphinx; in the case of the puzzle about birth, the parents). So the challenge of interaction that is intrinsic to both these riddles was overlooked. Let us look at a riddle for a clarification of this point:

I tremble at each breath of air,
And yet can heaviest burdens bear.¹⁵

Here one object is described by two contradictory descriptions. The incentive to solve this riddle is based on the assumption that the seeming incompatibility between weakness, implied in trembling at each breath of air, and strength, implied in the ability to carry the heaviest burdens, is not presented arbitrarily or erroneously. Rather, one assumes an intention on the part of the creator of the riddle, so that there is meaning embedded in the seemingly absurd presentation. Now the search will be directed toward items that may not be obvious, where the contradictory concepts or images may coexist. Wilbur gives a vivid description of a search process that yields an answer: water.

How central the expectation is that the riddle is presented by someone who knows the answer may best be demonstrated through the case of a riddle joke:

What is hanging on the wall, is green, and whistles?

The answer: a herring. It is hanging because it was hung; it is green because it was painted green, and it whistles to make the riddle a little more difficult. This riddle may be considered a joke on riddles, or an ungentle riddle, as was seen by Freud.¹⁶ However, a closer look reveals an essential element in the listener's attitude toward the riddle in general—the expectation that it was presented by someone with an intention, and that it has a solution. Without these expectations, it would be but an amalgam of nonsense; the destruction of these expectations is what turns this riddle into a joke. It can be said, then, that there is a riddle as long as there is a sense

of challenge presented by some other being, and a potential—motivational and cognitive—on the part of the listener to grapple with it.

But before we get to the solution, let us remain for a moment with the feeling of surprise and not-knowing that initiates the whole process in the mind of the listener. Riddles seem to carry in them the feeling that the solution *should have been known*. This is another characteristic that differentiates riddles from more general forms of curiosity and exploration. This feeling is responsible for the sense of being fooled in the riddle of the herring, or to a sense of failure in the case of more serious riddles. When solved, most riddles seem simple and immediately available to the listener. It becomes clear that the elements for solving the riddle were within reach, but beyond awareness.

Here Freud's understanding of the uncanny comes to mind. He focused on this feeling in relating to ways of arousing fear in storytelling. In his understanding, the uncanny is a state of feeling that relates to "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."¹⁷ He devoted his discussion to the question of how this is possible, and in what circumstances the familiar can become uncanny and frightening. Freud saw the uncanny as the result of two mental processes: the return of repressed anxieties, like the castration complex, and of repressed wishes, or the return of primitive modes of thinking like animism, omnipotent thoughts, magic, and sorcery. Those contents and experiences were once familiar parts of the psyche, and became unfamiliar through mechanisms of defense and sublimation. In the phenomenon of the uncanny, there is some breakdown of these mechanisms, and the old content of the mind becomes suddenly accessible. This return is accompanied by surprise and fear, as the material is perceived as coming from outside the person and as alien to the person's sense of self. We are reminded at this point of the riddle about riddles at the beginning of our discussion. The riddle is described as something serious as long as its solution is unknown, while the solution makes it not only known but familiar: it was always there, but unperceived. To summarize: in answering the challenge of a riddle, a person is confronted with information that he already possesses, but that for some reason, whether cognitive or emotional, is not available, so that he is not aware of possessing it.

Yet, even if the state of mind of the uncanny is a necessary precondition for the effect of the riddle, it does not automatically turn into a riddle. Another condition is needed—that of an active attempt on the part of the listener to complete the transformation of the alien back into something familiar. What forces might motivate the work of transformation? A recent discussion of the riddle of the Sphinx¹⁸ may serve as an illustration, and help us follow the dynamic of turning the experience of the uncanny into active working toward a solution of the riddle. Let us first recall how the story begins:¹⁹

The Sphinx lay at the gates of Thebes, waiting to challenge passers-by with riddles. No one could withstand the confrontation; all were devoured by the horrible creature. But along came courageous Oedipus, who had already challenged destiny [fate] once; he decided to seek out the Sphinx in order to try to solve its riddle. He stood up to the Sphinx, and by doing so, was able to recognize the essence of his being, the essence of man, which was also the solution to the riddle of the Sphinx.

The myth of Oedipus continues to unfold, and has called for many interpretations, the scope of which is far beyond the present discussion. Here, following Lidz, I wish to focus only on the riddle element in the myth. Lidz argues that Oedipus was able to solve the riddle of the Sphinx because he was successful in surviving separations, first from his mother and later from both of his parents. In his analysis, the riddle of the Sphinx and the Oedipus myth generally convey an effort to deny the need for a mother and concomitantly to undermine the power of matriarchy.²⁰ Whether or not we accept this interpretation that focuses on the dynamics of separation of man from his mother, or Lidz's stress on the triangular relationship that is conveyed in the myth, Lidz reminds us that the Sphinx and its riddle convey an important challenge to young Oedipus. We may see that Oedipus was able to rise above the state of awe before the almighty destructive power of the Sphinx and gain a state of relatively independent existence. In this new state he was able to relate to the Sphinx's riddle and solve it correctly. He was able to turn the frightening alien being into a familiar understanding, thereby destroying its haunting power. We should recall, however, that although Oedipus's success freed the besieged city, it did not free him from his destiny, for Greek mythology questions the possibility of a fully independent existence, especially of independent individual intention and acts. In the end, Oedipus fell victim to that part of his mystery that he could not solve, that was beyond the scope of his self-awareness: the fact that his enemy had also been his father and that his lover was his mother. For his unawareness of these realities he punished himself by gouging out his eyes. I wish to stress that the mysterious story of Oedipus's origin was not formed as a riddle: there was no way that it could be resolved. In other words, I wish to argue that the perception of a riddle is born out of the dim awareness of the existence of oneself as a separate subject, and the awareness of the existence of another object that may hold and generate inner processes, that has intentions and may create wilful acts—that is, another subject.

Psychoanalytic literature has been grappling with the development of this awareness from many aspects, as is documented in theories of object relations. But this problem has also interested cognitive psychologists, particularly in the area of development. Such a cognitive perspective can be found in the work of Gelman on principles that organize attention and learning in young children.²¹ Gelman demonstrated that children as young as three years of age are very clear in their differentiation between animate and inanimate objects. She claims that this differentiation is governed by two different principles of causal mechanism that apply to these two classes of objects. Animate objects are perceived to be moving on their own in a characteristic way, either when considered separately or as they respond to the environment; inanimate objects, by contrast, move in a characteristic way once another object interacts with them, but they cannot generate their own movement. In correlation with the above distinction between animate and inanimate objects, Gelman found that as early as three years of age children clearly differentiate the inside from the outside in animate objects, disclosing a distinctive awareness that what is seen is not all and not even the essence of a living thing, in contrast to the perception of inanimate things. A rubber doll is perceived as made of rubber and only rubber, while a living being is perceived as having an inner content that is not identical with its

surface. Gelman demonstrates that this differentiation takes place very early and seems to be an important achievement in structuring information about the world.

Gelman's distinction between animate and inanimate objects is important and helpful in clarifying the concept of the object in psychoanalytic theory. It is generally agreed that the line of development that concerns the object is essential to the development of the ego in general and the self in particular. Yet, the concept of the object is far less developed than the concept of the self, which is its counterpart in the notion of object relations. In my understanding, the two features of animate objects that Gelman distinguished—inner motivation and inner traits that cannot be perceived directly—are in the core of the differentiation and definition of the object in the psychoanalytic sense. I propose a conception of the object as a being that is separate from the self and that contains an inner source of motivation and inner traits that cannot be perceived directly. In this context, I suggest that the riddle is a form of expression and perception that is motivated by, and serves as a tool for, working through the relationship between the self as a subject and the object, that is actually perceived as another subject. In perceiving and responding to a riddle, the listener is giving testimony to the existence of another subject and at the same time is seeking some relationship with that subject. The uniqueness of the riddle as a tool in forming relations with an object lies in its effectiveness in exposing to the eyes of the subject inner characteristics of the objects. I shall come back to this point in my discussion of the mechanism of the riddle.

We can compare the role of the riddlee with that of the listener to a joke. The differences between the two are telling. In the case of the joke, the listener is invited to enjoy the work of the teller. This includes some degree of appreciation and even admiration. There is no doubt that in the case of the joke, the center of attention is captured by the teller, and the listener responds to enhance that state of affairs. By laughing, the listener serves the teller in two ways—first, by enacting the discharge of pleasure for both of them;²² second, by confirming the centrality and effectiveness of the mental processes of the teller. The listener can carry out this task through the ability to empathize with the teller of the joke. In the case of the riddle, the listener is invited to act on the riddle more specifically. He is invited to commit himself to a certain thought process that will yield a specific answer to the riddle. This commitment may become fruitful and successful, or it may turn into a failure or even a dangerous act, as in the myth of the Sphinx. In any case, the riddlee shares both the focus of attention and responsibility for the mental work that is involved in its creation. This last position exposes the riddlee, to a much greater extent, to issues of inadequacy and guilt that the riddle may raise. We must conclude that, from the listener's point of view, the riddle is a much more tricky affair than the joke. In comparing jokes to riddles Freud already noticed that the intellectual effort required of the riddlee is much greater than the effort needed to listen to a joke. This greater effort seems to me to express the work of transformation that takes place in solving the riddle. The transformation involves two levels—a cognitive level that responds to the cognitive structure of the riddle, and a work of defense, or a transformation of the defense system, in the encounter with the risks involved in answering the challenge of the riddler through the riddle. In discussing the forces motivating the answer to the riddler's challenge, we want to point out the anxiety that is inherent in recog-

nizing the existence of another subject who may have dangerous intentions toward the self. The riddle may both express this danger and show the way to transform it into a more benign interaction.

To summarize: the riddlee's involvement in the riddle-work is essential. The riddlee is the one who has to carry out the task of turning the unknown and unfamiliar into the familiar. It seems that the process of perceiving and solving a riddle, while at times dangerous, is a path toward new achievements in the development of experience and awareness and in constructing new relations to objects that are perceived as containing an inner life independent of one's own experience.

The Riddle

In this section we shall look at mechanisms that play a part in the construction of a riddle, and in finding an appropriate solution for it.

Freud compared riddle-work to joke-work, and noted two differences:

1. In the joke, the wording is given and the technique is disguised. In the riddle, the reverse takes place: the technique is given and the wording has to be guessed.²³
2. In the riddle, there is an awakening of conscious intellectual interest; in the joke, the awakening of such interest hampers the joke's effect.²⁴

These statements imply that Freud viewed riddle-work as intimately connected with the functions of the ego, while he viewed joke-work as aimed at deceiving the ego for the sake of impulse discharge. (This deception proceeds by distracting attention through displacement and representation by something absurd.) In this respect, the riddle seems to be a more structured form of dealing with impulses than the joke and further removed from the id. From the point of view of the relationship between the id and the ego, it may imply that the joke represents the interests of the id while the riddle represents the efforts (or threats) of the defenses.

Wolfenstein maintains a different position on this issue. She focuses her analysis of children's sense of humor on jokes that are based on wordplay. In her understanding, the child's immature defenses and his intense investment in images do not allow him to enjoy the relief of tension that is offered by the play of conflicting images to the point of their dissolution. This deficiency directs the child toward obtaining pleasure in other ways, such as fooling adults or turning a fearful situation into an exciting one. Wolfenstein has not advanced further in utilizing her own examples to explore the riddle as a possible paradigm for dealing precisely with those issues, especially the anxiety that is evoked by the confrontation with adults as the representatives of the experience of the powerful other.

Let us look at the work of the riddle through the interpretation offered by Theodore Lidz to the riddle of the Sphinx. As we have seen, Lidz interprets the riddle and the death of the Sphinx as the result of its solution as concerning "overcoming men's fear and awe of women, and the power of women, particularly the power of the mother and her hold on her son."²⁵ Analyzing the Theban myths as a whole, Lidz reaches the conclusion that the common core in those myths is the effort to deny the need for

a mother and concomitantly to undermine the power of matriarchy.²⁶ Lidz's framing of the core unconscious conflict of the myths in terms of the defenses against wishes (in this case regressive ones) does not seem to be accidental. The call for work of the ego in facing and solving the riddle fits the position of an assertive struggle to reach a higher level of homeostasis between drives and ego functions, a level that will best be attained through sublimation, but which may call for other defensive mechanisms in case of excessive anxiety and stress.

Let us see these elements at work in one children's riddle:

In the green house with the green furniture lives a green man. In the red house with the red furniture lives the red man. In the yellow house with the yellow furniture lives the yellow man. Who lives in the white house?

With hardly any exceptions, the tendency is to answer: the white man, but then the riddler gets a good laugh: the inhabitant of the White House is the president of the United States.

How does this riddle work? The technique of the riddle-work is based on developing a pattern of associations, here by connecting a house, a man, and a color. The riddle-work depends on the tendency to create rules and patterns, assuming that the listener will follow the line of associations laid down by it. But had the riddle-work stopped here, we would not have a riddle at all. It is essential to that riddle that the line of thought leads to the wrong answer. If the listener lets the obvious pattern of associations dominate his thinking, he is doomed to fail. The way to answer this riddle correctly is by maintaining control over the determined string of associations, and allowing for other meanings and associations to come to mind. Yet, in order to achieve the right solution to the riddle—the president of the United States—those other associations and meanings cannot be allowed to go wild. They are controlled by the wish to fit the pattern of associations and meanings laid down by the first person, the riddler.

This analysis is in accordance with Pagis's theory of the literary riddle.²⁷ Pagis argues that in a riddle there has to be a balance between what is concealed by the riddler and is given only indirectly, and the clue that should help to solve it. The game of the riddle takes place between these two poles. What we have in our hands, then, is a very strict dialogue, with limited options for maneuver; a dialogue that is the opposite of straightforward. It is constructed on the basis of the ability to create and recreate routes of associations and meanings, and stretches this ability to the maximum. This faculty is itself intimately connected to the ability to suspend reality and gain relative freedom from immediate stimuli. Listeners must feel at some point in working on the solution to the riddle that they do not have to be led along the track that has been laid down for them, that they have their own resources of meanings that enable a different perspective of the problem. In the riddle of the white house, the change of meanings is actually a change of context. The white house appears in the context of colors, but in order to solve the riddle it has to be transformed into the context of American politics. Solving riddles has much to do with the ability to play with contexts, which is connected to the ability to suspend the commonly perceived reality and create alternative realities.

Let us try to define more precisely the unique characteristic of the riddle as a dialogue between two parties. Let us look at this feature of riddles through another riddle:

My mother's daughter and not my sister, who am I?
The answer is: myself.

This is a common type of riddle, where the search is for the identity of something or someone. Something is presented in a disguise, and the resolution of the riddle consists of lifting the disguise and recognizing a familiar object that reappears unexpectedly—as in the game of peek-a-boo. This is a game that adults introduce to infants as young as five months old. Here a familiar face disappears and then reappears, and this procedure is usually accompanied by the intonation of a question and an answer, like “Where is mother?” “Here she is!”, thus reestablishing the contact that has been momentarily disrupted. Everyone who has ever played this game is familiar with the anxiety that the baby experiences while the familiar face is gone, and with the smile of relief when it reappears. Actually this game is enjoyable for the baby only after he has reached the stage of experiencing that anxiety. The solution to the mystery of the disappearing face is in the beginning in the hands of the adult, but gradually the baby learns that he can do something about it and may start his own search, while the other player may make the resolution more and more difficult. We may look at the game of peek-a-boo as a procedure of teaching the baby about separation and object constancy. But it seems to me that in this case the content of the communication is inseparable from the form it takes. In the beginning the adult knows the reality of her constant existence while the baby is ignorant of it. The adult then intrigues the baby by her sudden disappearance, and stays with him and leads him to the right answer: “Here you are. You have not really vanished.” The baby's anxiety concerning loss of someone with whom he had a relationship motivates him to act in order to find that person. In finding the object of his search, the baby reestablishes his contact with her, only now knowing something that he had not known before—that the other person can decide to disappear, but that he can do something to make her come back. From this perspective, the game of peek-a-boo may be considered a prototype of the situation of riddling. In riddling, a familiar object of communication or a familiar mode of thinking and communication is lost, and the work toward solution involves an act of reparation of the loss, through establishing contact on a different sphere—the sphere of inner processes and experience. This sphere is activated by the guidelines given by the cues that the riddle contains. If the riddlee follows the associations carefully, and is empathic with the riddler, he is able to avoid being misled by the surface of the riddle, while using the cues to get beyond it, to the true intention of the riddler. In other words, the riddle-work is designed to make the listener become lost in the wrong track of associations, until he finds his way back into a new, yet shared, path of associations with the riddler. In this sense, the riddler is experientially lost and found in the process of solving the riddle.

We can observe this theme of disguise and recognition of objects in the biblical riddle of Samson. The story starts with the secret of divine powers. God presents himself in disguise, posing the first riddle in the series—the riddle of his name, which

is left as an unresolved question in the story. Then Samson, possessing superhuman power, struggles with the wish to disguise his special power, on the one hand, and the wish to be so recognized by the other, on the other hand. Samson finds the riddle as a possible compromise between the two. On his way to Timnah, alone in the field, a lion comes roaring at him. Helped by the spirit of God, Samson tears the lion apart. On his return through the field, Samson sees a swarm of bees and honey in the carcass of the lion. He does not tell his parents what happened, but makes a feast, as young men used to do, and then he tells his riddle:

Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.
(Judges 14:14)

This is a riddle about the inner secret that may be hidden in objects. What meets the eye may be the opposite of the real essence of a thing. The riddle also tells us about the possibility of unpredictable outcomes, in the course of what seems to be a known reality. Samson sets a prize for the solution of his riddle, but the listeners immediately realize the aggressive nature of the challenge and act accordingly.

What makes Samson's riddle into such an aggressive act? If we keep to the level of content, it may seem to us a benign and even optimistic exposition of reality—even dangerous things have the potential to become nurturing and satisfying. Yet, on this level also there is deception and disguise—a benign riddle may turn into a violent act of conquest. In presenting himself through a riddle, Samson claims that there is a part of himself that is not directly accessible, and thus can become dangerous to others.

After presenting his riddle, Samson is in a constant battle to keep his secret to himself and to resist penetration of his privacy. A woman is sent to discover his secret, but Samson cannot reveal it because his power is effective only as long as it remains secret. The woman belongs to the enemy, and by knowing his secret, she enables the enemy to invade Samson's boundaries and possess his power. In this case, the riddle serves as a challenge to privacy and to autonomy. As long as it is not solved, privacy and autonomy are maintained, allowing one's special powers to exist. When the riddle is solved, privacy and power are gone.

In Samson's case, the woman finds a way to penetrate his private territory via her sexual seductiveness. Erotic intimacy is perceived as the main challenge to Samson's divine power and to his autonomy. The threat comes from the seductive woman, with whom he cannot assert himself through aggressive confrontation, as he can do successfully with men. He reveals himself to her and loses his uniqueness that protected him in his manly struggle.

In the case of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the riddles represent a more benign contact. They serve as a method of acquaintance. She disguises herself, and he is able to penetrate her heart and thoughts, an act that results in satisfaction for both partners. The two biblical stories represent two experiential possibilities of sexual intercourse. Let us remember that the union and loss of boundaries that are entailed in this act can be perceived as the culmination of happiness, but they can also be perceived as a most dangerous loss of power and the sense of self that may border on death. In sexual intercourse, as in the riddling situation, the perception of the other—the object of this act—gives a particular meaning to the experience of

loss of boundaries between subject and object that occurs when the process is consumed. Relating riddles to the sexual experience, then, enhances our understanding of both phenomena. It demands that we put the instinctual element together with the object relations in which the drives are experienced.

The common theme of all the possibilities that I have set out, up to this point, is the existence of a set of intentions, a will, that is separate from and beyond the control of the person who faces the riddle. For each case, at least one aspect of the riddle deals with the existence of an unknown other who possesses a will and a potential for action. The outcome of the transformation of the relationship between oneself and the other through solving a riddle may take more than one direction. The prior relationship between self and other determines whether the new intimacy that will be established—by turning the unfamiliar into the familiar—will bring relief and enjoyment or destruction. The other possesses impressive powers and may become dangerous. Uncontrolled intentions may turn from good to evil. It seems that one controls the dangerous other through controlling the riddle that he presents. The well-known genre of neck riddle brings this anxiety-ridden encounter to its peak: in these situations, survival itself depends on solving the riddle. The transformations may also be surprising in the opposite direction, however, as when a frog turns into a prince or a whole drama becomes a natural event (“I saw tears on the fields; the moon did not erase them, but the sun did. What did I see?” “Dew.”) But riddles are much more common in situations of tension and danger than in situations of peaceful harmony.

The analysis of the actual work that is demanded in solving a riddle brings us back to the issue of drives versus defenses. The ultimate aim of the work of solving a riddle lies in finding the best order and meaning for otherwise chaotic associations. Success in this work depends on being in touch with these mental contents, but it also concerns getting in touch with external expectations and laws of associations and meanings that are represented by another being. This work thus leans heavily on ego functions and may help to enhance their development to new levels of integration.²⁸ In sum, the integrative work in the situation of riddling involves three elements: drives, defenses, and an object, in relation to which this taxing work takes place.

The Riddler

We now turn to the motivations that direct a person to construct a riddle and tell it to others. Let us look once more into the riddle of the herring. It is easy to identify the group to which this riddle belongs: these are riddles by which children like to test one another, and adults in particular. We can immediately recognize the riddler's wish to stump her audience; this riddle is made so that it will not be solved. There is a contest, and the riddler outwits the riddlee. The latter's sensibility is challenged to the point of failure. As was noted by Wolfenstein,²⁹ this genre of riddles is most prevalent in late childhood, when children spend a great deal of energy exploring the world and exercising a new competence in mastering reality. Wolfenstein emphasized the connection between riddles and secrets. She paid special attention to riddles that concern a damaged person, the moron. Here is one example:

Why did the moron put hay under his pillow?—Because he wanted to feed his nightmares.³⁰

Wolfenstein suggested that the element of disguise in the riddle symbolizes engagement in secretive and forbidden acts that may be damaging. In the work of the riddle, the riddler overcomes the anxiety stemming from the forbidden act through changing perspectives, and by displacing the conflict that the riddle touches on into the sphere of the absurd, beyond the control of punitive authorities. In the dynamics of communication in such riddles, the riddler identifies with the vulnerable person who dares to enact his wish, and the riddlee represents the parental authority (or superego) that is being tricked. Wolfenstein pointed to the social role of riddles in the peer group of latency-age children. In telling riddles to one another, children achieve two aims: sharing the experience of secrets and affirming their budding autonomy from external parental authority. From the perspective of internal representations, the child seems to exercise the relationship between drives and the superego by turning passive into active, lending the role of the superego to the riddlee, and aggressively controlling it. The different images of the protagonist of the riddle seem to elaborate on its key question: Who is he? In terms of the theory of object relations, Who is the mysterious other, and how does he relate to the self?

Although this type of riddle borders on jokes, the choice of the genre of riddle may be of particular interest. In the joke, the listener's function is to reflect the experience of the teller in her joke-work; by laughing, the listener actually admits to sharing with the teller the same trends of thoughts and experiences. In sharing through laughter, one amplifies the pleasure of the teller. In the riddle, however, the riddlee is experienced from the start as an outsider to one's own experience, not touching upon the riddler's private secrets and disguises. It is as if the riddler is saying, "Here is something that I thought of and you don't know about it; let us see if you can get it." In riddling, the pleasure is achieved when the riddler affirms the riddlee's position as an outsider, Who nevertheless can be touched and manipulated—that is, when the other is established as an outsider who is within reach.

Riddling and Sharing Reality

The desire to create riddles is intimately connected with the ability of the mind to create alternative realities. The riddle expresses the wish to transcend the immediacy and inevitability of the relationship with reality, and with other objects in particular. At the same time, the riddler confirms a connection to reality and to the object, and the boundaries between inside and outside, unlike in fantasy and illusions.

In fantasies and illusions, as expressed in artistic creations, for instance, the relationship with the audience is nonspecific and less demanding than in creating riddles. Out of all these subjective expressions, only in the riddle is there an expectation of a specific response that will make explicit the level of communication and the shared mental processes or experiences between riddler and listener. From this perspective, the riddle may be regarded as an excellent means for clarification and creation of norms for internal, subjective experiences that are otherwise not easily shaped by shared reality. In this respect, we may distinguish two types of riddles: those that present all the details that are necessary for their solution, and those that can be solved

only by those who share the extra knowledge essential for their solution. Riddles of the first type explicate specific mental structures—concepts, categories, and their interrelations—and compare them with those of others. Similar structures will lead to similar solutions of the riddle. The riddle of Samson is an example of the second type. Let us look at it once more.

The riddle is based on an experience that Samson went through alone, that of slaughtering the lion. He presented his own experience in the form of this riddle. The process of solving the riddle involved a reconstruction of Samson's private experience, and by so doing transformed it into a shared reality: now the recognition of his superhuman power is shared by others. From this perspective, the motivation of the riddler to create his riddle is rooted in his dilemma, or rather his anxieties, concerning the realization that his internal experience is private and cannot be shared automatically and fully with anyone. This realization entails the awareness that an inner experience should be constructed and elaborated so as to be understood by another person. The riddlee may succeed in guessing the riddler's intention or may fail to do so. Two factors may affect the results. One factor is the nature of the riddler's subjective experience, which may vary from the ordinary that is shared by most human beings (birth, love, death, sunrise) to the extraordinary like Samson's. The other factor is the riddler's defensive, or disguising, maneuvers concerning his intention. Both factors contribute to dictate the extent to which the inner processes of the riddler become available and transparent to the riddlee, so that the two subjective experiences may be bridged momentarily in reaching the solution to the riddle. As already mentioned, this moment may be experienced as a threat in some situations and as providing relief in others.

The problem of sharing subjective experiences is at the heart of the psychoanalytic and most psychotherapeutic encounters, and it is tempting to explore them from the perspective of the riddling discourse. I would like to bring to the present discussion a clinical vignette in which both a child and a therapist were directly involved in communicating via riddling.

A Clinical Example

A. was referred to psychotherapy by his parents because of his difficulties in school. He did not want to go to school, particularly resenting the demand to do homework and other duties. A. was described by his parents as a dreamer, who tended to leave his things in a mess, who liked to spend a great deal of time watching television or just daydreaming. Otherwise A. was an intelligent and pleasant boy, goodhearted and cheerful, who did not like to fight or argue. A. had friends, but in his social contacts he was timid and sometimes felt rejected and weak.

In the first session A. hesitantly described his problems along the lines laid down by his parents. Then I invited him to play a squiggle game,³¹ which he joined with pleasure. Let me dwell for a moment on the special qualities of this type of communication. The directions to the starting participant are to make a scribble with as little control as possible. Closing one's eyes is helpful for this purpose. The other partner then adds his own part to the scribble, and so transforms it into a meaningful drawing. When the cycle is completed, roles change, and the second party makes a scribble

for the first to complete. Winnicott was interested in creating a situation where the controlling ego lessens its hold on the productions of the unconscious, so that unconscious wishes and fantasies may come to the fore more quickly and directly. Winnicott understood that by the help of a therapist who tunes in to the unconscious of the child through active participation in the process, the child may overcome the barriers of the defenses more quickly and more effectively. Although the squiggle method is interactive in its essence, Winnicott directed his interest to the intrapsychic dynamics of the patient, and paid little attention to its communicative aspect. This is the facet of the squiggle game that I want to focus on here; that is, by looking at this method as a dialogue between two people, who have different interests and motivations in their meeting, yet share the same rules and constraints of the discourse between them. In this dialogue one subject offers his production from his own internal reality to another subject, and allows the other to act on this production, so as to enable a creation of a mutual enterprise. With these considerations in mind, let me go back now to my first meeting with ten-year-old A.

A. wanted to start with a line. He made a short straight line which I turned into a comb. My curved line he integrated with the comb into a face. Then we made in turns a four-legged animal, a bird's head with a huge beak, and a crocodile; meanwhile A. kept repeating his worry that we would use up all my papers and I would be left with none. Then A. suggested something new—that we try to draw with closed eyes. First we were to draw a face and then a flower. A. looked at the results with astonishment and amusement at how the parts were all in wrong places. He was relieved to find that my efforts were no better than his. My drawings were subjected to his criticism and correction. Then A. introduced another variation: he would start a form and I would have to guess what he had in mind; then he would complete the clue by making a full drawing. He started out with a circle, which he accompanied with a verbal clue: “something that one needs when there is a problem in the eyes;” this turned into glasses (it is worth mentioning that I myself wear glasses). Then I made a pipe that turned into a pistol and he finished with a pipe that turned into a heater, of a sort that was in the room. It was clear that we were now in a riddling situation.

This pattern of communication (squiggles, then drawing with closed eyes, and then clues to images that the other person should guess) continued in the next five sessions, now through the initiative of A. Sometimes the order of stages two and three was reversed, and A. concluded by drawing a boy in a regular manner, with open eyes. The object of drawing with eyes shut became clearly one—always a boy; A.'s concern in this activity was that the parts of the body did not match or relate adequately to one another. He was surprised over and over by the outcome, as if he were trying to figure out some mystery. Here A. became gradually less strict in keeping to the rotation between us and was more interested in his own drawing than in looking at my productions. Yet in the riddling phase, our turns were kept, and in many ways A. saw to it that I would not get too close to him in my associations, or too imaginative. He effectively kept me tightly within the concrete situation of the room, and I felt controlled and confined.

In linking his preoccupation with integrating the parts of the body with the attempt to control my presence and activity, A. demonstrated his anxiety concerning

the power of another person to interfere with, if not to destroy, his sense of coherence and adequacy. Sexual matters were alluded to in autoerotic activities, in special interest in the buttocks and the legs, in attention to the difference between boys and girls, etc. But the relevant point to the present discussion was A.'s elaboration of these materials in the context of the relationship that he was working to establish. He was working out the possibility of expressing himself without endangering his sense of self in the presence of another person who would not overwhelm him with her own needs and agenda, but would be predictable and controllable to a safe degree. I gradually learned to recognize the roots of this problem in A.'s relationship with his overwhelming and unpredictable mother, whose investment in A. had strong selfish, narcissistic qualities. In this case, the issue of boundaries between self and other and the issue of the integration of the self were closely linked, if not interdependent. A's choice of communicating through riddling became his way of presenting this double task for therapy, and his first stage of handling it. Later, these themes manifested themselves in new modes, as anxiety changed its quality.³²

The clinical example described here demonstrates the problems of the relationship between self and other that the riddle as a form of communication may be called on to mitigate. Those problems may be more salient at some particular stage of development, as has been argued and demonstrated by Wolfenstein and McDowell, and they may then result in a special interest and productivity in this genre of communication with others. Yet, the urge to create and propose riddles has been wide enough in scope and variety to suggest the universality of the quest that is at the root of this form.

Discussion

After examining the phenomenon of the riddle from different angles, let us now go back and look at it as a whole and unique form.

Riddles are paired questions and answers that are designed to investigate the unknown other and bring it into communication with the self. From a psychological perspective, the riddle presents several problems that deserve theoretical discussion. Let me mention a few:

How does such a form of communication develop?

What are the developmental achievements that serve as prerequisites for the engagement in riddling on both the creative and the receptive ends?

What are the motivating forces that are embedded in riddling, and what are the pleasures that it satisfies?

Riddling as a Developmental Problem

Riddles assume developmental achievements in two main areas. The first is the cognitive. In recognizing a riddle and differentiating it from other sorts of questions, a person must already have some organized set of concepts and meanings and some awareness of the potential relativity of his organization of these concepts and

meanings. Understanding this relativity allows for the appreciation of other ways of organization and other meanings for the same set of words or concepts. The riddle expresses first of all a freedom to move from one set to another. Secondly, it expresses the tendency, or the need, to engage others in this developmental task through challenging another person with that same freedom that is under scrutiny.

Looking at riddles from this perspective, we are reminded of recent discussions of how we learn and what we come to assume about the workings of our mind and the minds of others. Attention is paid to the theory of the mind that children construct as early as three years of age to account for intentions and expectations of both themselves and others.³³ A relationship was found between the development of the understanding of false beliefs, the differentiation between appearance and reality, and the understanding of changing representations of reality in one's own mind.³⁴ The investigators believe that all three mental functions are related to a more general function: the capacity to account for alternative representations of reality. This achievement, which is reached gradually between the ages of three to five years, seems to be intimately related to the ability to take into account the point of view of another person. If there is actually a distinctive line of development that involves building a theory of the mind about oneself and about others, then riddles may be considered a medium especially suited³⁵ to enhancing this development. The riddle may serve this purpose best because it is constructed on the basis of assumptions about how patterns are created in the mind of the listener and what clues can be adequate for breaking those patterns and creating new ones. The ability to verify these assumptions through the process of presenting them to another person and receiving an answer from him makes the riddle a uniquely efficient and satisfying procedure in this context.

Seen from the psychoanalytic perspective, riddles involve a challenge to ego functions by enhancing awareness of, and by constructing and reconstructing defense mechanisms through engagement with, another person.³⁶ The unconscious and forbidden material that serves as the riddle's themes may be sexual, but it also tends toward aggression. Thus, successful solution of the riddle mostly contains relief from some threat that involves shame, mockery, or even hurt in the case of failure. From this point of view, the interest in riddles and riddling develops along the line of progressive mastery of instincts, particularly of aggression, in the context of the relationship with others. Riddles may assume a more formal and ritual form, as in the period of late childhood, or latency.³⁷ This stage of development is marked by great efforts dedicated to mastering the instincts and subjective experience in the social context. It is also a stage when aggression in the form of assertiveness is used extensively for adaptation. We may assume, however, that the passion for riddling may be revived later in life in any situation that creates encounters with new rules and laws and that challenges earlier mental organization of concepts, behaviors, and patterns of relating. In other words, any challenge to the equilibrium of the self, either from within the person or, particularly, if perceived as coming from outside, may drive a person to relate to the situation as a situation of riddling and engage himself in it, either as a receptive riddlee or as an active riddler. It seems that the prevalence of riddling games in wedding ceremonies fits this conclusion, but the value of this hypothesis needs to be tested by anthropologists.³⁸

*Riddling as Bridging between the Subjective Self
and the Subjective Other*

As we have seen, the riddle is in its essence a form of communication. We may ask, then, what is it that the riddle enables us to communicate, and with whom does it allow us to communicate? It is clear that the riddle is not the best way of communicating about unknown things. If we want to learn from another person about something that he knows and we do not, a genuine question would serve us much better than any riddle. On the other hand, if we want to communicate our experiences and our ideas, we may use any of many possible expressions, from the prosaic and literal to the elaborate and artistic, without having to be confined to the riddle format. The unique quality of the riddle as communication is that it engages the attention of the riddlee in particular ways and that it contains a test for its success in this area. Its basic structure emphasizes the importance of the two parties to this communication: the riddle would not exist if it were not for one subject who created it and another subject who could enter the communication and solve it, or be deceived by it. Human beings start at an early age to appreciate the presence of other beings and gradually come to realize that they contain their own inner life and mind that is separate from theirs. Stern³⁹ describes eight-month-old babies who know how to attract their mother's attention to a specific object or need. They are able at this stage not only to express their own needs through crying but also to actively draw the other person's attention to a specific thing, through eye-focusing and other means—that is, through appreciating the mother's way of paying attention. However, the subjective experience is not a static developmental achievement; rather, it is a continuous organizing principle of mental life that struggles continuously for coherence within the self and for recognition and communication with others. In this continuous effort, the riddle seems to offer some unique facilitating mechanisms and patterns for relating inner experience to others. In its demand for looking at things not in their obvious and habitual context, the riddle can draw attention to particular points of interest for the riddler. In its demand for a particular answer, it creates and defines shared trains of associations and shared concepts with another subject. Here lies the main difference between riddling and other forms of indirect communications, like metaphors, fables, and so on.⁴⁰ These forms of communication may arouse certain subjective experiences in another person, but they do not provide ways of controlling these experiences and ensuring that the subject who creates the communication is understood in any particular way. As opposed to the openness of the metaphor and the poem, the riddle is closed and represents not only a wish to be understood but also anxiety about the limitations of such understanding.

The Indian story about riddles “The Prince Who Married His Own Left Half”⁴¹ is a wonderful illustration of this function. The story begins by creating two separate subjects—a male and a female—so that they can be united again by marriage. In the next phase, the two subjects create their respective experiences separately from one another. Then comes the riddle in trying to bridge between their separate subjective experiences, where the main question is, Can the prince know what happened in the life of his wife and what she has in her mind? The point of reference in this story is

the existence of the male. He is the one who undergoes a metamorphosis in the creation of the other (the woman). The story documents his response to the presence of that other—his rejection of her and denial of her existence. In the end, the challenge implicit in the existence of the other is presented to him in the form of the riddle. More than one ending is offered to this story: in one, the prince is not capable of completing the process, and so is doomed to die; in the other, the prince's sister helps him solve the riddle, and it is the wife who dies. In any case, no way is offered to the couple to continue living in coexistence, and the story affirms the danger in transcending accepted boundaries. These boundaries can be defined in individual terms or in social ones, as in the Indian social structure; the riddle is brought in both to challenge and to affirm them at the same time.

Conclusion

This presentation is an attempt at a three-way analysis of the phenomenon of riddling—the riddle as a way of approaching others; the riddle as a mode of thinking and constructing ideas; and the riddle as a perceived challenge that calls for the act of solving. From all these perspectives, it seems that the riddle serves as a meeting ground between two parties—the riddler and the riddlee—even though one of them may not be present in reality but only imagined by the other. What is the quest that is dramatized in this form? The riddler seems to be searching for the way of thinking, the paths of association, of the person to whom he presents the riddle. In other words, he seeks to get in touch with the cognitive framework and inner experience of another person via activating and controlling it through the presentation of the riddle. The riddlee, on his part, seeks to meet the challenge presented in order to get in touch with the riddler's ideas embedded in the riddle. Reaching out, expanding one's own conceptions and experience, and coming closer to someone who is perceived as possessing treasured knowledge or power are central motivating forces in answering the challenge of riddles. Issues of power and aggression are closely linked with the attitude to the other in the riddling situation and are commonly expressed in mythological riddles and in children's mockery of riddle jokes. The aggressive element in riddles seems to be connected to their enactment of the differentiation between the experiences of inside and outside, between a subjective self and a subjective other. This awareness constitutes a major dimension in the development of cognition, as is shown in research on theories of the mind. It also constitutes a major source of anxiety and challenge in the development of internal experience, the experience of the other, and of the world in general. Traces of anxiety about the constancy of objects, as expressed in the theme of disguise, are common in riddles. We can also easily trace defensive elements in the riddle as a dialogue. Boundaries between concepts, between categories—be they cognitive or social—and between self and other are both asserted and transcended by riddling. The riddle might then be regarded as the expression of a compromise between the sense of freedom and autonomy of the self and the anxiety that this freedom entails.

Notes

I wish to thank David Shulman for challenging me with the riddle, and Sidney Blatt, Donald Cohen, and Bennett Simon for their illuminating comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. This riddle is cited from Wilbur 1989: 333.
2. Brooks 1986.
3. *Ibid.*, 14.
4. A fuller account of the issue is presented by McDowell 1979: 20–41.
5. Freud 1905.
6. Kris 1952.
7. Wolfenstein 1951, 1953.
8. Freud 1905: 149.
9. In his discussion of the difference between jokes and riddles, Freud presented both forms as dialogues, in which the other party is essential for the completion of the process. In the case of the joke, Freud saw the function of the listener in enhancing the pleasure of the teller of the joke by laughing. Yet he did not offer any clarification of the function of the listener in the case of the riddle (Freud 1905: 150, 152).
10. Pagis 1986: 44–45.
11. Wilbur 1989.
12. See Fairbairn 1954 and Guntrip 1982 for presentations of the object-relation theory and its clinical implications. Bacal 1987 wrote a critical summary and discussion of the British object-relation school in psychoanalysis, from the perspective of the new developments in the concept of the self.
13. Freud 1905: 144.
14. See Lidz 1988, n. 4.
15. Wilbur 1989.
16. Freud 1960: 215.
17. Freud 1919: 220.
18. Lidz 1988.
19. I refer to the story as told by Hamilton 1942: 257.
20. See Lidz 1988, esp. 38.
21. Gelman 1988.
22. Freud 1905: 158.
23. *Ibid.*, 32, n. 6; 67. Kris accepted Freud's position about the relationship between wit and riddles. He noted that they both share a special position in mythology, and in mythical thought, but did not develop this idea further (Kris 1952: 176).
24. Freud 1960: 150.
25. Lidz 1988: 38.
26. *Ibid.*, 42.
27. Pagis 1986.
28. Wolfenstein compared joking riddles of children with jokes and came to an opposite conclusion. She saw the riddle as a less sophisticated creation that enables children to obtain other sources of pleasures while they are not yet able to utilize fully the pleasures of wordplay embedded in the joke (Wolfenstein 1951: 348). Her analysis, however, does not pay any attention to the specific nature of the riddle as a mode of interaction and a work of sublimation, and uses the joke as the sole model of her analysis.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 346.
31. The squiggle game was developed by D. W. Winnicott as a mode of communica-

tion with children in the clinical situation. In this exchange, one participant starts with an unstructured scribble and the other shapes the scribble into a meaningful picture. The theoretical principles of the squiggle technique and their powerful clinical applications are discussed in Winnicott 1971.

32. Another clinical example of riddling is embedded in a case of an adopted child who was presented in Green 1988. At a certain point in his therapy, when he was grappling with the issue of trust in others, including his therapist, in connection with his adoption, he developed a game of guessing in which the therapist had to find out what he had in mind. Green interpreted his communication from the point of view of the feeling that the boy induced in her, through identifying with his own feelings of not knowing and of searching for the truth. But such a way of communication also implied the possibility of the therapist's counter-transferential response to the patient's anxiety. Thus, in responding to the child, the therapist met both the boy's anxiety about his origin as well as his anxiety about her not being in touch with him, her being lost to him at this moment.

33. See Astington et al. 1988 for a full account of the research and the theoretical status of the concept in the context of metacognition as a general cognitive achievement.

34. Gopnik and Astington 1988.

35. Gopnik and Astington 1988 discussed this issue in the context of normal development. Perner et al. 1989 offered interesting evidence from autistic children whose impairment touches specifically on their deficiency in developing intersubjective relationships.

36. Freud 1905: 150; Wolfenstein 1951: 345–348.

37. Wolfenstein 1951.

38. Pagis 1986: 62–63. See Handelman, Hasan-Rokem, Stein, and Narayara Rao: this volume.

39. Stern 1985.

40. Pagis 1986: 39–44 came to a similar conclusion in this poetic discussion.

41. Ramanujan 1986. Ramanujan's reading of the story is deeply informed by psychoanalytic insight, yet he draws on self-psychology and the theory of narcissism. In my perspective, by contrast, there is an effort to link the concept of the self with the concept of the other. It seems that this dual focus can better account for the role of the woman-wife in the riddling situation that this story presents.

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AFTERWORD

GALIT HASAN-ROKEM and DAVID SHULMAN

And yet the riddle of the riddle remains unsolved. Perhaps it is best that way: at least we refrain from reproducing the illusion of hermetic closure so prevalent in this genre. In another sense, however, this is precisely the point, worthy of elucidation at the conclusion of this volume.

Formal analyses of riddling have been beautifully stated before—by Köngäs-Maranda, Lieber, Dundes and Georges, Kaivola-Bregenhøj, and others—and we have built upon these foundations, despite our professed preference for issues of existential expressivity. To recapitulate, in brief: there is a structure of encoding, or enchantment, or doubling (erotic suggestion), which entails a block to perception and a knotted conflation of domains (often with elements of linguistic paronomasia or visual punning); the solution removes the block, unties the knot, and usually also disenchants. By definition, this process unfolds in the social context of a challenge; the challenger controls the answer, which is always overdetermined. An initial act of calculated ambiguation—seemingly underdetermined, superficially permitting multiple answers on the basis of the clues supplied—moves toward the disambiguating, singular conclusion. Within the boundary zone of the block, a deterministic transformation comes to operate, at least within those riddles of the variety analyzed by Don Handelman in relation to transformative rituals. If there are, indeed, riddles capable of sustaining more than one answer, they are relatively marginal to the primary concerns of our study.

Does any of this bring us closer to answering the question with which we began: “Why sing riddles at the moment of dying?” Or, for that matter, to answering a striking series of analogous questions, which have emerged naturally in the course of our work: Why is the riddle so intimately linked to loss, or images of loss? Why is it so dangerous, at times, to solve it? What kind of knowledge, or self-knowledge, does the answer really imply?

All too often—to address the final question first—an unstable and elusive kind. Think, again, of Oedipus, the successful riddlee par excellence, who nevertheless totally fails to relate his clever answer to himself, as Freddie Rokem has so subtly

shown. His feet, his body as a whole, his eyes and blindness, his memory, his forgetting—all of these are present in the riddle of the Sphinx, and all are excluded in the first response, the answer that makes Oedipus into a king. It is, in fact, this process of exclusion that motivates the whole of Oedipus's subsequent story. His initial cleverness—the neatly bounded, determined answer—is exposed as wanting, no less crippling than the driven act of the infant's parents, in their terror at the oracle (perhaps wrongly understood!). The "solution," in short, is no real answer. It is, at best, a temporary resting place in a continuing process of enigmatic self-occlusion, or of the shifting confrontation with the opacity at once internal and external to awareness.

Similarly with the poignant riddles in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, as Irene Eber has revealed: each of them is capable of being deciphered, and yet the underlying structure of paradox survives this moment of solution. Paradox is built into the containing narrative, which alone imparts sense to the riddles; and this frame-ethos is explicitly stated, not as riddle but as motto: "The false becomes true when the true is false."¹ What truth, then, exists in the perfect solution to the perfectly contrived riddle?

Yudhiṣṭhira, the hero of the Sanskrit epic, answers "correctly" each of the puzzling questions put to him by his disguised father, the one-eyed Yakṣa-bird. Each answer is at least satisfactory enough to produce a subsequent question, in this ongoing trial, when failure to answer means death. But perhaps it is precisely the ironic insufficiency of the answers, as we have tried to show, that makes the trial go on and on. Even one "true" answer is, finally, fatal. And while Yudhiṣṭhira's "questions" (*praśnas*) are not proper riddles, by our analytic categorization, they suddenly appear to us to be motivated by the same illusionary and potentially ironic thrust that the riddle so commonly embodies.

Solomon successfully answers the riddles posed by the Queen of Sheba. Ostensibly, he is the wise and triumphant male. Seen more deeply, in Dina Stein's analysis, each of his answers suggests his own failure to understand and to know—either his opponent or himself. In riddling as in living, there is very little to be said for being right.

Eikha Rabba, the Midrash on Lamentations, encapsulates a long sequence of riddle tales. The riddles they contain have answers, and these answers point to the seemingly vast superiority of Jerusalem, and the Jerusalemites, over their contemporaries and rivals. At the same time, Jerusalem, the locus of right answers, is lost, destroyed, alive only in longing and memory.

And so on. To risk what is no doubt an overly general formulation: probably only the literary riddle, of the type analyzed by Dan Pagis, is capable of sustaining for long, and without ironic distance, a singular solution, and then only when it is decontextualized (e.g., written down in manuscript and stored in a library); within context, it tends to transform itself creatively into further genres, as Pagis shows. More commonly, the "nonliterary" riddle, a riddle alive in social context, produces not an answer but the *illusion* of an answer—or at any rate, the illusion that the given answer is in some sense complete. There may well be a considerable cultural or psychological investment in this illusion, but any living context will eventually tend to deflate, unravel, gloss, or transcend it, just as the proposed solution itself tends to

deflate the animating enigma that gave it birth. But then again, the relativity of the solution is perhaps implied in the playful nature of its embedded praxis. Let us recall, too, that the designated roles of riddlee and riddler are often interchangeable and arbitrarily bestowed: the riddle is a contest that is, by definition, a game. Sometimes, of course, a game of life and death.

Think, then, of the enigma—creative, recalcitrant, transformative, rich in anxiety and in promise, pliant, generating contexts and moulding language—as motivating the riddle, which is a momentary and self-limiting crystallization of this dynamic force. It then transpires that the core of the riddle's expressivity will be in what we have called the block or the knot, where conflation, ambiguous suggestion, linguistic superimposition, and enchantment still survive. The answer, by way of contrast, demarcates the congealed and instrumental illusion; and we can now understand why this answer needs to be overdetermined, given its arbitrary and reduced nature. Surprisingly, a deeper opacity seems, in fact, to be active here, in the answer, which can fascinate everyone—riddler, riddlee, audience—with its aesthetic and cognitive coherence. But even here, in the opaque and disambiguated answer, we can begin to explore a typology that includes the “true” illusion, the “false” illusion, and various degrees of closure, ranging from the hermetic sealing off of all semantic space to the more loosely organized answers in which peripheral or residual gaps, cracks, and crevices can still be seen.

Wittgenstein, as we have seen, denied that riddles exist.² The existence of a “real” answer follows from the posing of any “real” question. But we can now see that the true nature of riddling lies just here, in the precarious opacity of the solution, its collective and arbitrary nature, and its unsettling situation in unfolding contexts, which tend to illuminate a tenuous and partial predication. The existence of an answer does, it is true, define the riddle, but not in the manner we might have thought. The entire logical process of untying the knot continues well past the arrival at a solution. If we ask ourselves again whether there is but a singular solution to the riddle, we will have to answer rather differently: *yes*, if we bring the process to a premature halt, if we truncate its wider mode of implication, slicing through the living sequence; *no*, if we examine the situation from a more continuous perspective, informed by the narrative, ritual, or metaphysical contexts which alone bring the knotted question into focus. In many cases, what we see is an initial answer consistently reframed, each time to include a fuller vision. The meaning of this answer changes in the light of each new frame, and each such frame also tends to bend or break open the apparent closure of the earlier level of response.

There is a difficulty here with the notion of sequence. Overdetermination belongs to the level of temporary and arbitrary stasis, to the slicing through of process. As Handelman has shown, riddles do the work of transformation in this mode. “Sequencing is integral to the enigmatic impact of the riddle . . . driving one inexorably within its paradox, smack against its internal boundary.”³ Egress from this paradoxical inner boundary reconstitutes the relations between parts and wholes, such that a higher level of abstraction comes to subsume the previously conflicting parts. That this can happen at all seems to reflect the formal autonomy, or relative autonomy, from context of which Handelman writes. But once a context *is* applied, the reconstituted whole tends to be opened up once again from within, as if the internal bound-

ary, the knot, had looped back on itself to reencompass the reordered parts. Riddle narratives regularly bring this looplike dynamic into play, restating the riddle with reference, for example, to the existence and biography of the riddlee—as, for example, in the two existential and self-referential riddles described in Richard Bauman's essay, or with Oedipus. In such cases, where the answer to the riddle is, effectively, something like "myself," or "the irreducible experience that is uniquely mine," the moment of apparent closure actually discloses an open-ended and perhaps inexpressible expanse, visible through the unstable and tantalizing processes of self-disguise.

Two further results follow from this perspective. First, we can note an affinity between the riddle form and narrative in general, in the sense that both presume upon our notions of sequence, linearity, and the self-limiting and overdetermined consequences of the latter. Perhaps, in the end, it is this very sequencing that constitutes, or energizes, the knot. There is, then, a sound intuition in those South Indian technical terms for riddle that imply a latent narrative structure (Telugu *pōḍupukatha*, Tamil *viṭukatai* < *kathā*, "story"). The riddle, looked at in a forwardly evolving direction, is a story structured around a knot; untie the knot, and the unbounded enigma lies in ambush. Once again, however, we may detect an illusionary investment in this form. If, as Handelman shows, at the moment that "the whole riddle structure rises to the surface to encompass its parts . . . the answer is then seen to precede and to generate the question, rather than the opposite,"⁴ we should be able to read this story backwards, or in recursive loops, as whatever context or use would demand. In fact, such demands are visibly inherent in riddling, which regularly engages a rich associative semantics and charges the everyday world with energies of the imaginary. "What has golden hair and stands in the corner?" The very formulation of the riddle articulates a selection from the manifold world of associations; the answer fixes this selection but never finally loses sight of the initial fascination. Only a rigidly formal mode of analysis, which fails to situate the riddle in a living context and which insists on linear sequence, will deprive the riddle of this expressive potential. Sequence, in this case, segments and stretches out a slice of the enigma, thereby creating a conventional (but possibly misleading) progression through paradoxical blockage toward lucid redefinition or reframing. Or we might imagine that the surface illusion of linearity effectively sustains the always unframed, indeed unarticulated and finally unanswerable meta-question of the enigma, which keeps seeking partial formulation in the reduced frames of the riddle and its persistent block.⁵ In this sense, the "right" answer is also much less than right—more like an attempt to capture, hook, or tie down some part of the enigma beyond the frame. Here—in this understanding, with its implications for the wider cultural uses of riddling—is, we believe, a small step forward made possible by the collective work of this volume.

Second, the cognitive contribution of the riddle evolves from this same process. We learn of the world, its categories, its boundaries, through this game; and, in the more profound moments of play, we also learn something of the self, insofar as this word has meaning. Shlomith Cohen has discussed at length the vital interplay of self and other that riddling entails. But it seems we may now have to consider the possibility that the meeting of self and other enabled by this form is at least partly illusory—no less so than the proposed authoritative solution. Still more poignantly, we have room to wonder about the knowledge of self that one achieves: Is it romantic,

as in the case of Turandot? skewed, as with Samson? tragic, or tragically truncated and delayed, as for Oedipus?

Stated more abstractly, the riddle carries out a complex negotiation between self and other, or self and self. The formal and limited riddle structure articulates a momentary positioning of an unfinished subject. It may even carry through a process of self-recognition on the part of this subject, although, as we have seen, such self-awareness is not an end-point but more of a resting place, pregnant with future movement. In this respect, the riddle brings into play a subject positioned on the edge of disappearance, of melting back into the enigma. Playful energies allow this opening, which also enables their creativity. But the momentary and structured crystallization simultaneously endangers and liberates the living subject—riddler, riddlee, or eavesdropper on this process. What looks like a solution, or a definition, is more akin to a crack through which one might glimpse the enveloping enigma—call it God, call it a culturally specific formulation of the generative imbalance between what is and is not, or cannot be, understood. Hence the perpetual restlessness and fluidity of this genre, even in the case of the literary riddle which, once solved, turns back upon itself.

The crack is structured as a knot. The creative thrust of the riddle is active here, in the elaboration of this tangled node, superimposing level upon level, interweaving reference and suggestion, occluding logical resolution. And since the “answer” somehow preexists, we can describe the knot itself as paradoxically less bound to the teleological illusion of stasis than is the supposedly lucid resolution. “You find what you already have in your mind”⁶—an “as-if” object, masking its origins in the name of collective sensibility. In this sense, the riddle’s work of transformation is indeed heavily conditioned. But the metaphysical presence of the enigma infuses the determined structure of the riddle form with indeterminate processuality. The structure, sequenced in linear progression, momentarily emerges from the enigmatic process under the guise of knowledge, or of reality. But the knot itself is remarkably resistant to any ultimate dissolution, and strangely open, a potential, dynamic, and subjective space. Reverse the sequence, penetrate the ironic illusion of the answer, reinstate the set as a member of itself, recast the die—as one does at weddings, at the moment of dying, wherever riddles are recited—and the challenge, the still unbounded frame, reverts naturally to the Sphinx.

Notes

1. See page 241.
2. See p. 192.
3. See p. 53.
4. Ibid.
5. We thank Don Handelman for this perception.
6. See p. 204 (Narayana Rao).

AUTHOR INDEX

- Aarne, Antti, 29
Abrahams, Roger D., 11, 13, 14, 32, 43,
49, 62, 63
Aesop, 279
Al-Ṭabari, (839–923), 132
Al-Thaʿlabi, (first half of the 11th century),
132
Allama Prabhu, 180, 182, 185, 186
Apollodorus, 255, 257, 262
Archevolti, Samuel, (1530–1611),
100
Aristophanes, 264
Aristotle, 260, 267, 272, 289
Athenaeus, 257
Auerbach, Erich, 280

Bakhtin, M. M., 53, 62, 73
Balzac, H. D., 219
Bāṇa, 173, 174
Barthes, Roland, 218, 219
Basava, 179, 182
Basavaṇṇa, 180
Basavaraju, L., 187
Bascom, William, 18
Basgöz, Lihan, 49
Beck, Y., 101
Ben-Amos, Dan, 47, 193
Ben-zoma, 103
Bergson, Henri, 53
Bhagwat, D., 168
Blacking, 42
Bloch, Howard, 218, 219
Bodker, Laurits, 62
Briggs, Katharine, 63
Brooks, Peter, 294

Burke, Kenneth, 182
Burns, Thomas A., 11

Cantor, Georg, 290
Cao, Xueqin, 237
Carrol, Lewis, 209
Cittar, 182
Confucius, 228
Coulthard, R., 67
Cuntarar, 180, 182

Daṇḍin, 168, 169
Devara Dāsimaṃya, 180
Dharmadāsa, 168, 173
Dorst, John, 53, 62, 63, 69
Dundes, Alan, 22, 29, 32

Epimenides, 290
Euclid, 285, 286
Euripides, 257
Even-Shoshan, A., 101

Fairbairn, W. R., 296
Fermat, P. de, 288
Flahaut, François, 218
Foucault, Michel, 274, 277
Frege, F. L. G., 290
Freud, Sigmund, 182, 294, 295, 301

Galilei, Galileo, 97
Ganander, Christfrid, 26, 29
Gauss, F., 286
Gelman, R., 299
Georges, Robert A., 29
Glazier, Jack and Phyllis, 32

- Goedel, Kurt, 291
 Goldstein, Kenneth, 66
 Goody, Esther, 67
 Green, Thomas A., 17, 42
 Guntrip, H., 296

 Ha-Romi, Immanuel, (ca. 1270–1330), 97
 Hacking, Ian, 48
 Halevi, Yehuda, (1075–1141), 86, 91, 98
 Hanagid, Samuel, 100, 101
 Handelman, D., 194
 Harries, Lyndon, 15
 Heraclitus, 259, 271, 274, 279
 Hillel, 102
 Hippasus, 290
 Homer, 277, 279
 Hsün Tzu, 230
 Hu Shi, 237

 Iamblichus, 278, 289
 Israel, Jacob Vita, (mid-eighteenth century), 88

 Jakobson, R., 181
 Johnson, Ragnar, 42, 43
 Jolles, A., 97
 Julian, Emperor, 279

 Kabīr, 180, 182
 Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Annikki, 45
 Kālidāsa, 7, 8, 175, 176
 Kane, P. V., 174
 Kasirēddi Venkaṭa Rēddi, 194, 195, 196, 199
 Kierkegaard, S., 182, 293
 Knox, B., 261, 263
 Kōngās-Maranda, Elli, 32, 41, 42, 48, 49, 193
 Kuusi, Matti, 19

 Lamberton, Robert, 272
 Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 128, 263, 265
 Li Po, 234
 Lidz, Theodore, 299, 301
 Lieber, Michael, 45, 51
 Lönnrot, Elias, 192
 Lüthi, Max, 62
 Luzzatto, Efraim (1727–1792), 97
 Luzzatto, R. Moshe Hayyim, (RaMHaL), (1707–1747), 82–83, 95, 97

 Māgha, 176
 Mahādeviyakka, 180, 182
 Malatesti, Antonio, 97
 Mallinātha, 176
 Maximus of Tyre, 276, 278
 McDowell, J. H., 309
 Modena, Leon (Yehuda Arie), (1571–1648), 87

 Nador, Georg, 103, 104
 Nammālvār, 180, 181, 182, 185, 188
 Narayana Rao, V., 47, 48, 49
 Nietzsche, F., 219
 Norton, F. J., 62

 Oliveyra, Shlomo de, 97
 Olmo, Jacob, Daniel, (ca. 1690–1757), 86
 Olrik, A., 69
 Oppenheimer, 181

 Pagis, Dan, 114, 120, 197, 302
 Pāṇini, 7
 Parmenides, 259, 289
 Pausanias, 276
 Pepicello, W. J., 17, 42, 176
 Pepin, Jean, 272
 Plato, 259, 260, 263, 264, 275, 279
 Plotinus, 277
 Plutarch, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 279 ?(271–277?)
 Polya, G., 285
 Porcher, M. C., 168, 171
 Porphyry, 277
 Proclus, 277
 Proust, M., 186
 Pu Songling, 239
 Pythagoras, 275

 Quine, 290, 291
 Quintilian, 272

 Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosa, 103
 Ramanujan, A. K., 43, 48, 49, 162, 194, 292
 Rosen-Moked, Tova, 85, 86, 90
 Rudnytsky, P. L., 265
 Rudraṭa, 172, 173
 Russell, B., 53, 290, 291
 Ruyyaka, 172

- Saarinen, Sirkka, 22
 Sacks, Harvey, 67, 69
 Sadan, Dov, 98
 Sallustius, 277
 Śaṅkara, 182, 186
 Saussure, Ferdinand de, 33
 Schegloff, Emanuel, 67, 69
 Schroedinger, E., 285
 Shah, Lalon, 182
 Shakespeare, W., 217, 265
 Shulman, David, 48, 50
 Sinclair, J., 67
 Smith, Pierre, 38
 Socrates, 260
 Sophocles, 211, 256, 257, 261, 262, 265, 267
 Sternbach, L., 168
 Strabo, 276
 Straparola, Giovanfrancesco, 97
 Strauss, Leo, 274
 Sūr, 180

 Taylor, Archer, 29, 67
 Ten Raa, Eric, 16

 Tertullian, 279
 Turner, Victor, 179

 Vālmīki, 7
 Vernant, Jean-Pierre, 262
 Veyne, Paul, 276
 Vico, Giambattista, 272
 Vidyāpati, 180, 182
 Virtanen, Leea, 15, 28, 45

 Wilbur, Richard, 295
 Wilde, Oscar, 181
 Williams, T. R., 49
 Winnicott, D. W., 296, 308
 Winograd, Terry, 11
 Wittgenstein, L., 192
 Wolfenstein, M., 301, 305, 306, 309

 Yu Pingbo, 237

 Zacuto, Moshe, (1625–1697), 87, 88, 89,
 97
 Zeno, 289

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SUBJECT INDEX

- Action riddles, 114
- Aggression, in riddles, 26, 70, 83–84, 135–40, 304
- Ahuda Na*, 101
- Ainos* (fable), 279
- Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, 164
- Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 210
- Allegory, 188, 275
- All's Well that Ends Well*, 217
- Ambiguity, in riddles, 17–19
- Anagnorisis*, 115, 261, 267, 268. *See also* Knowledge, of self
- Anagram, 234
- Analects*, 228
- Analogy, 68, 139
- Analytica Posteriora*, 260
- Androgyne, 264
- Answers to riddles, 29–33, 70, 188. *See also* solution
- Answers, language of, 166
- Anti-structure, 179
- Arabian Nights*, 292, 293
- Arugat Habosem*, 100
- As You Like It*, 265
- Avot, Mishnaic tractate, 91
- Bēḍagu* poems (Kannada), 190
- Ben Mishlei*, 100, 101
- Bhagavad Gītā*, 181
- Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 209
- Bhakti*, 179–90
- Bible, 95, 109, 125, 130–31, 304
- Big bang theory, 286
- Block, to deciphering, 41–48, 53, 316–320. *See also* Boundary
- Body, and riddles, 257, 262, 266. *See also* Knowledge
- Book of Changes (I Ching)*, 228, 233
- Book of Documents (Shu Ching or Shang Shu)*, 228, 230
- Book of History*, 228
- Book of Songs (Shin Ching)*, 228, 234
- Boundary, internal to riddle, 44–46
- Brahman, the Ultimate, 153, 165, 201
- Brahmin, 152, 154
- Brahmodya*, enigmatic utterance, 153, 210
- Categorization, cultural, 4–6, 9, 128
 - normative, 136, 138
 - social, 137
- Causation, 47
- Character-splitting, 232
- Children's riddle, 302
- Ching-Hua yüan*, 234
- Christian drama, 262
- Christian hermeneutics, 271
- Chronotope, 53, 63
- Chuang Tzu*, 229
- Circle, squaring the, 289
- Classical literature, 139
- Classifications. *See* Categorization
- Clues to deciphering, 90
- Co-texts, 126, 127
- Code, in riddling, 84–95
- Commentary on the Cave of the Nymphs*, 277
- Contest, verbal, 165

Context, to riddling, 39–40, 46–47

Batesonian conception of, 40

Conundrum, 230, 237, 238

Conversations of the States, (*kuo-yü*), 230

Cosmological levels, 155

Cosmological reference, 154

Cratylus, 263

Curse, 163, 164, 165

Darshan, 140

Death, and riddling, 3, 109–21, 155, 159

Decoding, 29–33, 43–46, 84–92

Defense mechanisms, 310

Demon, 131, 132

Dharma, 152, 161

Dice game, 48, 151

Dictionary of British Folktales, 63

Dictionary of Riddle Terms, 62

Dirges, 87

Discourse, dramatic, 257

Discursive situation, 125

Disenchantment, 4, 275

Drashat pasuq, 140

Drashot, 139

Dream of the Red Chamber. *See Honglou meng*

Dreams, 187

in riddle form, 49

and guessing, 49

Drives, 306

Ecstasy, techniques of, 179

Ego functions, 310

Eikha Rabba, 109–121, 127, 139

Eliade, Mircea, 179

Emblem riddles, 82, 114

Encoding, 8, 41–48, 85–92

English Riddles from Oral Tradition, 67

Enigma, 53, 74, 119, 208, 316–320

cosmic, 176

Enigmatic tasks, 115

Epic hero, 166

Epigram, 99, 100

Eroticism, in riddling, 193–94. *See also*
Marriage; Wedding

Epithalamium, 87

Euclid's Elements, 288

Eulogies, 87

Fate, 158, 160–64, 241–43, 246, 256

Fathers, 156–57

Folk riddles, 169, 176

Folktale, 66, 67, 70, 72, 94, 238

Formula, analysis, 19–25

Games

of chance, 48

of language, 197

metalinguistic, 98

polyglot, 87

See also Dice game; Squiggles game

Gematria, 82, 89, 92, 103, 119

Gender, differentiation in riddling, 137–38

Genres, primary (simple), 62

riddle-like, 171

secondary (complex), 62, 74

Geometries, alternative, 286

God. *See* Enigma, cosmic

Harsacarita, 174, 175

Heracleitan saying, 279

Hierarchy, paradox of, 85

Holy names, 180

Holy places, 180

Homeric myths, 271, 277

Homeric poems, 274

Homonymy, 175, 231

Honglou meng (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), 234, 237–47

How to Solve It, 285

Human images, paradoxical, 155

Humor, 295

Hymylä, journey to, 26–29

I Ching, 228, 233

Identity, 9, 71–72, 114–16, 155, 159, 210–
220, 266–68, 298–99, 306–307

Identification puzzles, 156

Identifications, moral and cosmic-symbolic,
159

Indexicality, 43, 194

Intentionality, 96

Intertextuality, 127, 263

Inversion, 73

Īśa-Upaniṣad, 176

Jokes, 66, 295, 306

Judges, 115

Kādambarī, 173, 174

Kālajñānam, 203

Kalila and Dimna, 130

- Kathāsaritsāgara*, 216
Kāvyaḍarśa, 168
 Kinship laws, 129
 Knowledge, generated by riddles, 5
 of other, 310–12
 religious, 273
 of self, 115, 159, 220, 256–68, 292
 Koran, 132
 Koranic commentators, 132
 Kṣatriyas, 154
Kuzari, 98

 Lamentations, Midrash on the Book of. *See*
 Eicha Rabba
 Language, 8, 140–41, 157, 185–86, 291
 despair about, 181
 Lantern riddles, 230
Lao Tzu, 229
Le Piacevoli Notti, 97
 Legends, 45, 238
Leshon Limudim, 83
 Levels, theory of, 46, 291
Liaozhai zhiyi (*Strange stories from the*
 Liaozhai studio), 238
Library, The, 255, 257
Lieh Tzu, 229
 Lilith, 131
 Literary criticism, Sanskrit texts on, 168
 Literary riddles, 81–106, 120, 196–99, 232,
 234, 295
 Logical types, 43
 Loss, and riddling, 119–21
Lun Heng, 228

Mahābhārata, 48, 151, 157, 158, 161, 162,
 204, 211
 Man, definition of, 263
Mantra, 182
 Mapping, cognitive, 155
Maqams, 95
Märchen, 73
 Marriage, 6–7, 49, 121, 129–41. *See also*
 Wedding
 Mathematical problems, 284
 Mathematical riddle, 287
 Men, in riddling, 137–38
 Metaphor, 44–45, 46, 69, 73, 85, 89, 90,
 94, 160, 181, 186–188, 217, 229, 234,
 273, 278
 Metaphoric transpositions, 159. *See also*
 riddles, metaphoric

 Metonymy, 73, 90
 Microcosm, 38
 Midrash, 109–47
 exegetical, 119
 Midrashic riddles, 115
 Mind, theories of the, 312
Mishlei, Midrash on. *See* Proverbs,
 Midrash on the Book of
 Monk's riddles, 156
 Monochord, 289
 Motherhood and riddling, 135–36
Motif-Index of Folk Literature, 67
 Mūladeva, 214–16
 Myths, 180, 182

 Nala, 158
 Names, 219
 Narrative event, 72
 Narrative, 73
 Neck riddles, (*Halslösungsrätsel*) 54, 62,
 63, 70, 72, 95, 115, 286, 305
 Negation, 182–84. *See also* Curse
 Neoplatonic philosophers, 277
 New riddles, 16
Notariqon, 82, 85, 92
 Novella, 73

 Object relations, theories, 299
 Object-relation theorists, 296
Odyssey, 217, 277
Oedipus Tyrannos, 256, 258, 262, 267
 Oedipus, story of, 299
On the Gods and the World, 278
 Onomatopoeia, 22, 234
 Oracle, 228, 256
Oracles at Delphi, 272
 Ottava rima, 82
 Oxymoron, 172, 181

 Palindromes, 197
 Parable, 99, 119
 Parabola, 289
 Paradox, 8, 43–44, 53, 94, 97, 163, 164,
 172, 180, 181, 218, 279
 and metaphor, 98
 situational, 138
 Passage, rite of, 38
 Passover ritual meal, 49
 Peck-a-boo, 303
 Personification, 73
Phaedrus, 279

Philosophy of Oracles, 277

Phoenician Women, 257

Play, 180

metalinguistic, 87

See also Games

Po-Hu T'ung, 228

Pōḍupukatha, 191, 198, 199

Poem, philosophical, 99, 101

Poems, humoristic, 87

Poetics, 267

Poetics, Biblical, 130

Poetry, erotic, 180

Polysemy, 86

Pornographic riddles, 194

Power, institutional, 70

Power, interactional, 70, 73

Practical riddles, 137

Praḥelikā, 168–76, 199

Praśna, 153, 155, 161, 163

Probability theory, 48

Problem-questions, 193

Processual structure of the riddle, 50

Processuality, 52, 54, 163, 261

Proper names, riddles about, 98

Proper riddles, 94, 102, 114

Proverb, 99, 101, 102, 238

Proverbial expression, 231

Proverbial statement, 258

Proverbs, Midrash on the Book of, 125, 127, 129, 131

Proverbs, Book of, 102, 128

Psalms, 128

Pseudo Ben-Sira, 129, 132

Punning, 73, 173–175, 231, 238

Puns

bilingual, 82

visual, 232

Puzzles

categorical, 164

crossword, 171

verbal, 153, 230

word, 168, 172

Pythagoreans, 289

Quartina, 82

Questions, hidden, 193

Queen of Sheba, 114, 125, 127, 304

Quotation, 141

Raghuvamśa, 175

Rāmāyaṇa, 7

Rebuses, 114, 241

Repetition, 162

syllabic, 172

Republic, 259, 260

Ṛg Veda, 208, 209, 210

Rhetoric models, 128

Riddle

ballads, 62

images, 50, 67, 128

jokes, 312

narratives, 63, 72, 114

poems, 181

question, compound, 72

sessions, 193

Riddles

cognitive process of, 14

discriptive element of, 72

language of, 16

metaphoric, 187

modern popular, 173

mythological, 312

nonoppositional, 85

oppositional, 85

rhetorical tactics of, 138

traditional classes of, 169

See also Action riddles; Lantern riddles;

Literary riddles; Monk's riddles; New riddles; Pornographic riddles

Riddling

context of, 11

event, 74

with the future, 205

narratives, 114

process, 137, 138

scenario, 155

situations, 83, 94, 114, 116, 129, 131,

135, 303, 310

tale, 125, 127, 134

Ritual, 115, 155, 179

boundaries of, 138

of healing, 49

riddles in, 11, 48

Rumpelstiltskin, 95

Sacrifice, 152, 154, 164

Samāsokti, 187

Samson's riddle, 95, 102, 114, 115, 128, 303, 307

Sarrasine, 219

Sastras, 179

Scandal of the Fabliaux, *The*, 219

- Scienza Nuova*, 272
 Self-reference, 290, 291
 Sequence, 52, 69, 72
 Sequentiality, 53, 66, 70
 Sexuality, 135–41, 210–20, 304
 Silence, 154
Śisupālavadha, 176
 Solomon, King, 114, 125, 127, 304
 Solution, 54, 81, 120, 128, 261
 single, 96
 multiple, 97
 Sonnetto, 82
 Speech act theory, 70, 82
 Sphinx, the riddle of the, 255–68, 298
 Spoonerism, 22
Spring and Autumn Annals, 230
 Squiggles game, 308
 Storytelling, 74, 199–200
Śūnyasampādane, 186
Subhāṣitaratnabhāṇḍāgāra, 169
 Subjectivity, 6, 307, 311–12
 Superego, 306
Symposium, 264
 Synecdoche, 46

Ta-Hsüeh, 233
 Taboos, 128, 136
 Talmud, Babylonian, 116, 117
Tantra, 182
Targum Sheni, 127, 131, 132, 134
 Temples, 180
 Terza rima, 82
 Test narrative, 114
 Tests, 114, 137, 161
 Time, 53, 135, 151, 204

Topica, 260
 Trial, 162
 Trick questions, 193
 Tricks, linguistic, 231
 Tricksters, 216
Tso Chuan, 230
 Turandot, princess, 134

 Uncanny, the, 298
 Upanishads, 180, 208–209
 speculative tradition in, 153, 155

 Veda, 161
 Vedas, 179, 180, 182
 Vedic study, 154
 Verse riddle, 230
 Verses, figured, 171
 Verses, problem, 171
Vetāla-Pañcaviṃśatika, 114
Vidagdhamukhamāṇḍana, 168, 169
 Voice, 6–7, 180, 258

 Wakes, 49
 Wedding, ceremonies, 129, 310
 riddles at, 121
What Is Life, 285
 Wisdom question, 129
 Wit, 295
 Women, and riddles, 135–40, 217–20
 Wordplay, 231

 Yoga, 180
Yogavāsiṣṭha, 209

 Zen Koan, 47, 49, 53, 209